

PRAIRIE VISIONS

WRITINGS BY HAMLIN GARLAND
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON MORRIS

EDITED BY KEITH NEWLIN
FOREWORD BY KURT MEYER

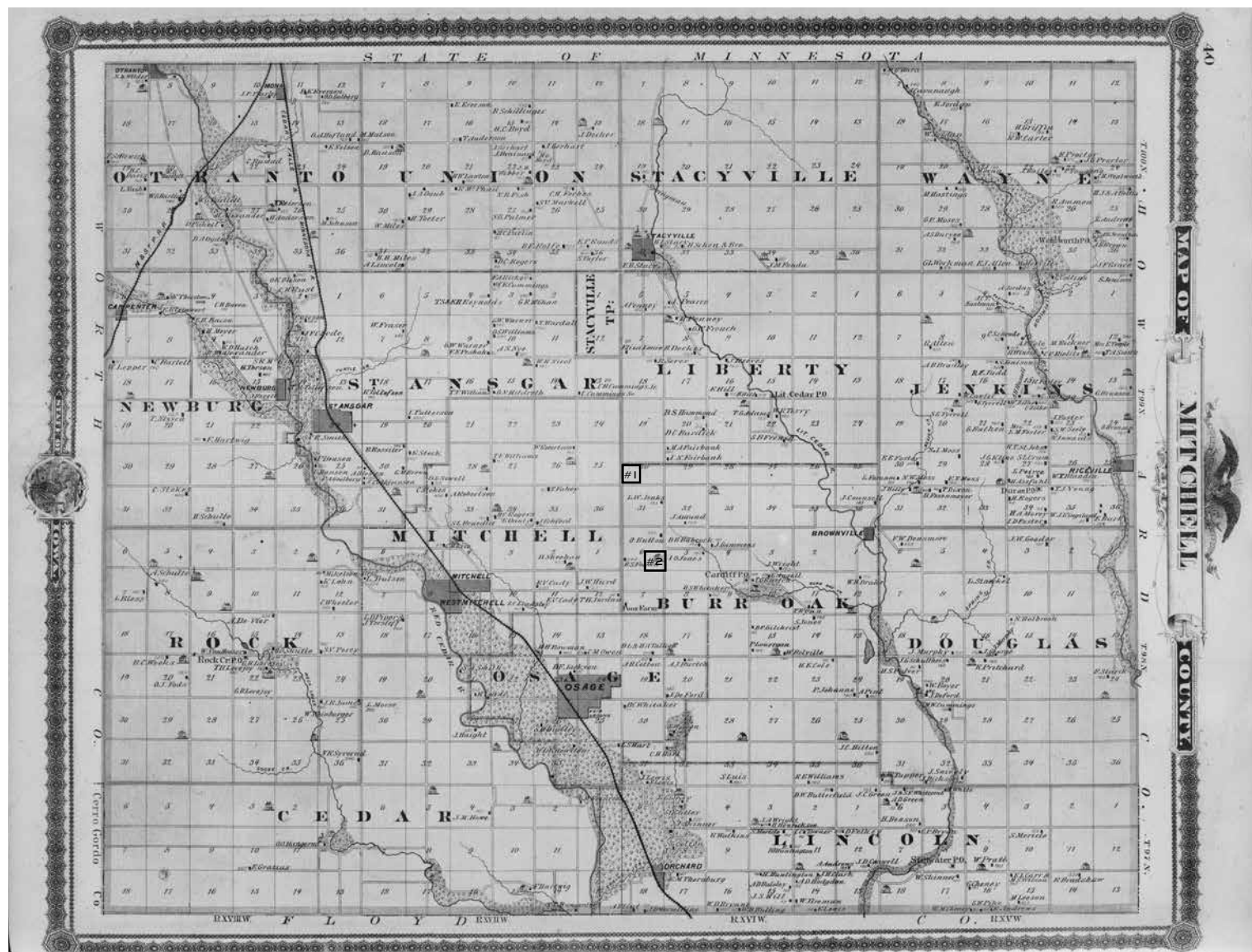
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1875 map of Mitchell County, Iowa. The Garland family's first farm was located in Burr Oak Township, SW quadrant of section 30; the Garland family's second farm was located in the SE quadrant of section 6. (Courtesy David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.)

FOREWORD

The origin of this book can be traced back fifteen years. I had reached the conclusion that the significance of Garland's Iowa years, from the late 1860s to the early 1880s, was generally overlooked by literary scholars and historians. As is true for many of us, these years, from pre-adolescence to early adulthood, were vitally important to Garland's emergence as an individual, as a writer, and as a participant in American history. Perhaps the best evidence of this is that the author drew extensively on his prairie experiences throughout his career.

With Garland-like fervor, I was determined to set the record straight. My objective was to shed light on Garland's Iowa years and illuminate examples where Garland's rural Midwestern encounters were essential to his development as a person and an author. If only I could coax literature professors to tour the prairie landscape of "Garland Country" and witness scenes that found their way into Garland's stories.

Then a thought occurred to me. My friend Jon Morris is a superb professional photographer. Perhaps he would collaborate with me in an effort to capture the rustic flavor and rural beauty of the prairie setting. Almost before I finished asking, Jon told me to count him in. In many ways, this informal understanding was the genesis of this book.

Within a year, Jon and I met Keith Newlin, one of a small cadre of Garland scholars, a professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, then working on a Garland biography. Without supplementing Jon's considerable talents with Keith's wisdom, guidance, and persistence, this book would never have happened. To work with Jon and Keith has been a great adventure and a source of considerable pleasure.

Of course the real stars of this publication are Hamlin Garland and the prairie environment that profoundly affected him. Garland chronicled life in Northern Iowa knowing that much of what he experienced as a young man had changed or was changing rapidly; without his careful recording, it might be lost forever.

In some ways, this book serves a similar function. Like the changing landscape, literary tastes also move through transitions. Accordingly, Garland must be introduced to and appreciated by new and expanded audiences or risk becoming an irrelevant footnote in American literature.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1870, 10-year-old Hamlin Garland arrived in Mitchell County, Iowa, where his father had purchased a quarter section of unplowed prairie sod. Upon confronting a “meadow so wide that its western rim touched the sky without revealing a sign of man’s habitation,” Garland later remembered, “The majesty of this primeval world exalted me. I felt for the first time the poetry of unplowed spaces.”¹

Readers of Garland’s fiction have long noted the author’s ability to convey the poetry of the landscape even while depicting the squalor and meanness of the prairie farm. At the beginning of “A Branch Road,” for example, the story that opens Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), the narrator, Will Hannan, observes,

Above the level belt of timber to the east a vast dome of pale undazzling gold was rising, silently and swiftly. Jays called in the thickets where the maples flamed amid the green oaks, with irregular splashes of red and orange. The grass was crisp with frost under the feet, the road smooth and gray-white in color, the air was indescribably sweet, resonant, and stimulating.²

Later, he notices the contrast provided by the dinginess of the farmer’s home: “The room was small and very hot; the table was warped so badly that the dishes had a tendency to slide to the center; the walls were bare plaster grayed with time; the food was poor and scant, and the flies absolutely swarmed upon everything, like bees. Otherwise the room was clean and orderly.”³ This pattern is typical of his fiction: an opening that celebrates the natural, wholesome beauty of the landscape, followed by a depiction of human lives that fail to measure up to the promise of the land.

Garland possessed a pictorial eye that exulted in describing the natural landscape, and the landscape that mattered most and informed everything he subsequently wrote was that of rural Iowa. In *Crumbling Idols* (1894), his only foray into literary theory, he remarked, “I assert it is the most natural thing in the world for a man to love his native land and his native, intimate surroundings. . . . All the associations of that child-hood and the love-life of youth combine to make that web of common affairs, threads of silver and beads of gold; the near-at-hand things are the dearest and sweetest after all.”⁴ In conveying his

Despite numerous moves, Hamlin Garland was a remarkably placed person. And more than any other location, the Midwestern prairies were his place. Change is at the heart of these stories. Interlacing Garland’s words with Jon Morris photography helps us see – perhaps even feel – some of these changes.

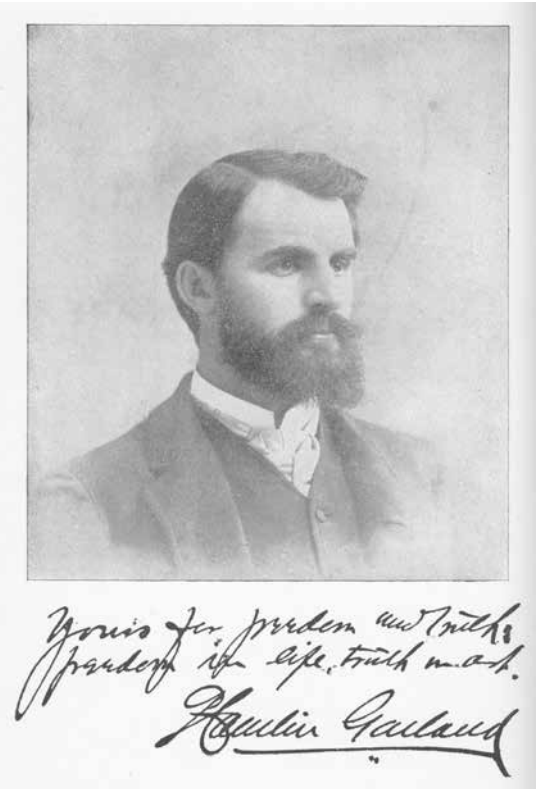
The thought of exposing his prairies to new readers would have given Hamlin Garland considerable satisfaction.

—Kurt Meyer

love for his native landscape, Garland took every opportunity to describe the colors of the sky and the fields, the lushness of the soil, the textures of plants, and the sounds and motions of wildlife. His most common adjective is “glorious,” and his poetic imagination responded to the beauty of the natural world even while he noted the contrast presented by the poverty of the prairie farm.

But before he achieved fame as a writer of what he called the “middle border,” before he even attempted to write the stories that made him famous, he set down his memories of his boyhood on an Iowa farm in a series of six articles entitled “Boy Life on the Prairie,” which were published in *American Magazine* in 1888. In these sketches, which follow the seasonal activities of farm life over the course of a year, Garland sought to preserve his boyhood memories. These articles, which have not been reprinted since their first

publication, are of value in their own right for their evocative depiction of prairie farm life, but they are also important for their place in Garland’s development as a writer. In them he first recorded the centrality of place, specifically northern Iowa, for his imagination; in them he discovered scenes, techniques, and themes he would later infuse in fiction; and in them he discovered his knack for autobiographical writing, perhaps his most accomplished genre.



Hamlin Garland in 1890. Garland has scrawled, “Yours for freedom and truth: freedom in life, truth in art.” The portrait was later used as the frontispiece for the 1891 and 1892 reprintings of *Main-Travelled Roads*. (From the *Arena* 2 [Dec. 1890], facing pg. 97.)

In reprinting the “Boy Life” articles here, and accompanying them with Jon Morris’ splendid photography of scenes from rural Iowa, our hope has been to present two complementary visions of what drew Garland’s eye to the landscape. Our intention is to illuminate those distinctive features of rural Iowan life that engage the imagination.

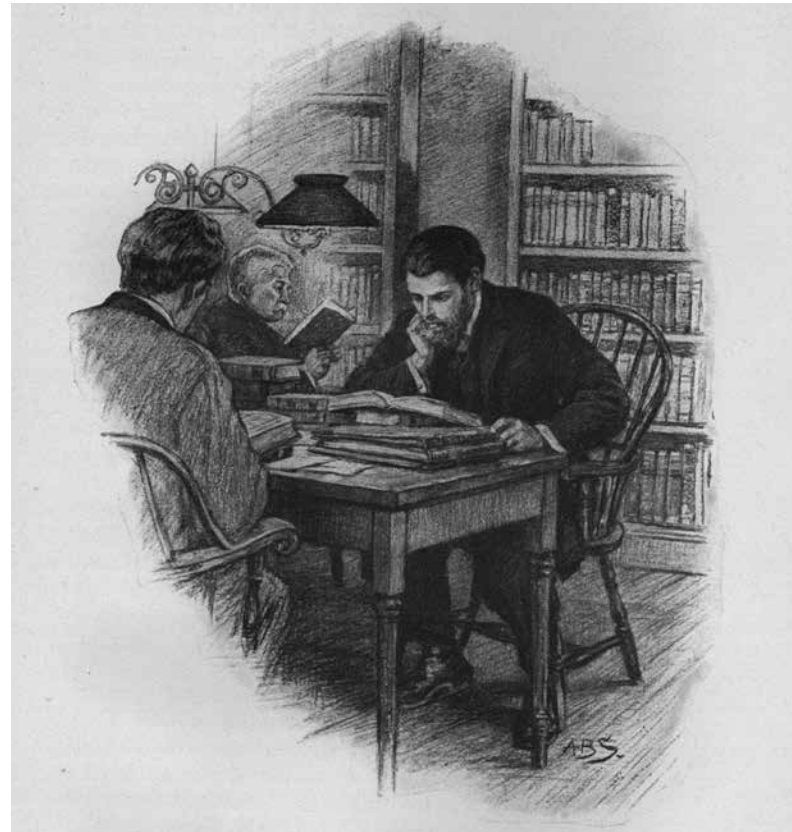
I.

Hannibal Hamlin Garland was born on September 14, 1860, in a squatter’s shack on the outskirts of the village of West Salem, Wisconsin. His father, Richard Garland, had a serious case of land fever, and by the time Hamlin was 10 his family had moved four times to a series of farms in northern Iowa. In February 1869 the Garland family arrived at the first, located in Winneshiek County, Iowa, two miles west of the small village of Hesper, about which Garland later recalled, “All my memories of this farm are of the fiber of poetry. The silence of the snowy aisles of the forest, the whirring flight of partridges, the impudent bark of squirrels, the quavering voices of owls and coons, the music of the winds in the high trees,—all these impressions unite in my mind like parts of a woodland symphony.”⁵

Garland was too young to remember why, but in March 1870 his father once again uprooted his family and moved from his Hesper township farm to a rented farm six miles west. What he did remember was the effect on his mother: “I see now that she must have suffered each time the bitter pangs of doubt and unrest which strike through the woman’s heart when called upon to leave her snug, safe fire for a ruder cabin in strange lands.”⁶ But his father was not satisfied with this farm, and so he scouted other locations, eventually settling on the tall grass prairie of Mitchell County. Here, about 60 miles west-southwest and near the town of Osage he purchased a 160-acre farm of unplowed prairie. He moved his family there in August 1870, after the harvest was done. “The cabin faced a level plain with no tree in sight,” Garland recalled. “A mile away to the west stood a low stone house and immediately in front of us opened a half section of unfenced sod. To the north, as far as I could see, the land billowed like a russet ocean.”⁷

Two years later, in September 1872, Garland’s father once again uprooted his family to move them to a new 160-acre farm he purchased to increase his land holdings, this time only one and one-half miles south, and there they would remain for the next nine years. Here, on these two Mitchell County farms, Garland would later set many of his most effective stories. As the oldest boy (of four children), to Hamlin fell the burden of

the hard work of turning prairie sod into productive fields, including driving a heavy sod-breaking plow whose handles were nearly out of reach of his 10-year-old arms, brutal labor that would mark him forever. “On certain days nothing could cheer me,” Garland remembered. “When the bitter wind blew from the north, and the sky was filled with wild geese racing southward, with swiftly-hurrying clouds, winter seemed about to spring upon me. The horses’ tails streamed in the wind. Flurries of snow covered me with clinging flakes, and the mud ‘gummed’ my boots and trouser legs, clogging my steps. At such times I suffered from cold and loneliness—all sense of being a man evaporated. I was just a little boy, longing for the leisure of boyhood.”⁸ Looking back on his childhood on the farm from the perspective of middle age, Garland recalled,



Sketch by Alice Barber Stephens of Hamlin Garland at work in the Boston Public Library. The figure in the background is William Dean Howells, Garland’s mentor. This image is one of the extra illustrations that appeared in *A Son of the Middle Border*, Special Autograph edition, a limited edition of 1,000 copies with additional illustrations and signed by the author.

Most authors in writing of “the merry merry farmer” leave out experiences like this—they omit the mud and the dust and the grime, they forget the army worm, the flies, the heat, as well as the smells and drudgery of the barns. Milking the cows is spoken of in the traditional fashion as a lovely pastoral recreation, when as a matter of fact it is a tedious job. We all hated it. We saw no poetry in it. We hated it in summer when the mosquitoes bit and the cows slashed us with their tails, and we hated it still more in the winter time when they stood in crowded malodorous stalls.⁹

When he was 16 he entered the Cedar Valley Seminary in Osage, a combination high school and junior college, returning to the farm for the planting and harvesting seasons. After graduating in 1881, at age 21, he journeyed east, where for two years he did odd work and taught school. Later he rejoined his family in the Dakota Territory, where they had arrived to homestead after the failure of their Iowa farm. Dissatisfied with homesteading, he moved to Boston in October 1884 determined to further his education and launch a career. At the time, he wasn’t sure what shape that career would take—at times he fancied he would be an orator, a poet, an actor, or a critic—he was certain only that he would not return to farming.

In July of 1886, Garland was busy reading contemporary American literature, particularly novels and poems that depicted life in the Midwest, and lecturing at the Boston School of Oratory, where he had landed a position as an adjunct “professor” of American literature. To prepare his lectures, he began sending a series of letters to the leading writers of the day, asking for biographical details for his lectures but also trying out his developing theories about how literature can best express the nuances of American rural life. He wrote to the novelist E. W. Howe to praise his depiction of Midwestern life in *A Moonlight Boy* (1886). “Your strong true delineation, of the monotonous and provincial life of the rural west compels my admiration,” he noted, “though it grieves me to think how unavoidable the most of its life is.” And then, comparing his own experience on an Iowa farm to that depicted in Howe’s novel, he added, “Has it not seemed to you a terrible waste of talent many times, when you have met men and women of fine powers, musical maybe, who were hedged in by circumstances, walking a dull routine of

petty duties, compelled to forget the outside world?”¹⁰ In this early letter, the 25-year-old Garland identified both the eventual subject of the work of his long career as well as his purpose in writing: to delineate with accuracy the actual life of the Midwesterner while also pointing to its limitations.

At the time of this letter, Garland had not yet discovered his calling as a writer of short stories and novels that would challenge prevailing depictions of idyllic farms and bucolic country life. In a second letter to Howe, Garland clarified his impression that prairie life was undergoing a rapid transformation, brought on through the hard work of farmers whose efforts to turn prairie sod into productive farms brought forth a “new race” of children who are “strong, clean free young men and women one generation only removed from the men and women herded like cattle in the depots of Chicago, stupid, dazed, ill smelling; punched and pushed and ticketed like baggage.” This life should be the subject of fiction, Garland concluded, for “the west is not known as yet. All that vast seething transfiguring mass of men in the Mississippi valley, because they have not produced their own writers, are unknown. Travellers go through and write a few lines as observers. Here and there some one writes of material or semi-material things in prose, *none* have given the deep, unseen *true* life of the people.”¹¹

One year later, Garland became a traveler himself when he returned to Osage for the first time since he left six years earlier. With his sensibilities now refined from his years in Boston through his association with young writers and artists, he took out his notebook and began to jot down his observations. “The town seemed smaller, lonelier and more squalid,” he recorded upon his arrival on July 4, 1887. The next day while staying with William Frazer, one of his former neighbors, the reality of the squalor of farm life struck home. At dinner that night, “the boys smelled of the stable and the whole scene was depressing and irritating,” he recorded. “The mother scolded her boys harsh and petulant. Frazer shouted at the quarreling children with sudden rage. Manners were exceedingly rude and primitive.” Garland filled his notebook with his disenchantment, describing the squalor of living conditions, the effect on the people, making note after note with an eye for the telling detail: “The girl was fat, slatternly, and sloppy. She wore a mustache on her lip.”

Yet he was also aware of the striking contrast presented by a bountiful nature. In the evening, sitting in a pasture, he listened to the night sounds:

Flies hummed all round, and the notes of a humming-bird far away; a robin chirped, and king birds and sparrows in the wind-brake kept up a cheerful chatter. A blackbird broke forth at times into that unctuous wuree. The sounds from the farm yard completed the symphony. For a moment it made me forget the barrenness and monotony of this life. “How sweet it is to live in such peace,” I said. . . .

In that moment I became the boy of the past, and for a moment all that I was or had attained in the East was forgotten. I had the impulse to let all things else go by. “Here is all that is best and most lasting in life,” I said.¹²

These two motifs—the squalor of the Midwestern farm set amid a contrasting scene of natural beauty—would dominate his writing for the next seven years.

When he returned to Boston after this summer trip, he began to cast about for a form through which to express his new-found sensibility of the reality of life on a frontier farm. He brought that awareness to his lectures, and while he first seemed to view poetry as the genre most suited for expressing the wondrous beauty of the natural landscape, he also tried his hand at fiction as a means for conveying the contrast between the crudity of farm life and the beauty of the land. But these efforts weren’t successful. Then, one day he heard the sound of coal being shoveled in an alley as he labored at his desk. The scrape of the shovel reminded him of his boyhood on his father’s farm, when he would shovel corn from wagon bed to crib, “and I fell a-dreaming, and from dreaming I came to composition,” he later remembered.¹³ The sound prompted him to draft “The Huskin’,” the first of six articles comprising “Boy Life on the Prairie” that would be published in *American Magazine* from January-October 1888.

His summer visit had not only caused him to appreciate the hardships he had endured on a prairie farm, but he also became aware the events of only a few years ago were already consigned to past history, so rapid was the development of the prairie. He began that initial article by noting previous writers had adopted a romantic view of farm life:

In prose or rhyme [they] have told us about the gathering in the old barn, of the merry lads and the red-cheeked lasses who blushed the rosier when the red ear of corn was found; of the candles set in hollow “punkins”;

of the dough-nuts and the cider, and all the rest of the old-fashioned paraphernalia, which is getting slightly conventional to the Eastern mind, and wholly so to the Western.

But as he had confided to Howe, he would adopt a more realistic view, faithful to actual life and presenting “the deep, unseen *true* life of the people,” while also responding to critics who claim ““There isn’t any poetry in such wholesale methods of corn gathering;”” by striving to show the picturesque details while remaining true to his memory.

In “The Huskin’” and the five articles that followed, Garland sought to portray the typical life of a boy on an Iowa farm over the course of the year, beginning with husking corn in October and threshing wheat in the fall, to the onset of spring in March and the planting of crops in May, to haying in the summer, and concluding with harvesting crops in September. His account is rich with detail that not only describes his memories of his boyhood activities but that also reveals the considerable beauty of the natural landscape, for which he discovered a new appreciation as he reflected upon his boyhood from the cramped quarters of his crowded garret in Boston. The dominant tone is nostalgia, both for his boyhood and for the passing of a way of life that had already, in a few short years, been supplanted by modern farm machinery. At this point in his writing, Garland had not yet learned to depict the indignation that so marked the stories that were gathered in *Main-Travelled Roads*. His primary purpose was to describe the Iowa farm as he remembered it. Later he would use similar description as a backdrop for sketching the impoverished lives he had recorded in his notebook chronicling his summer visit. But at this point, happy memories prevailed. While Garland does note that farm life for a boy is hard, he is not outraged, as he is in his fiction; rather, such life is to be celebrated for its connection of people to the land, for the land itself becomes the center of sustaining value.

Garland makes this point explicitly in “Meadow Memories” when he observes that “The summer was at its ripest and most liberal stage of vitality, and at its greatest luxuriance of blossom, and it is not strange that even faculties dulled and deadened with incessant toil caught a little of the superabundant glow and throb of life.” He then proceeds to illustrate the compensating virtue of the landscape:

The corn-field, so dark green and so sweet-smelling, rippled like a sea, with a multitudinous stir and sheen, and swirl and lift; waves of green and dusk and yellow careering across; long leaves flung up like spears or shaken like a host of banners. The trees were in full leaf; the insect life was at its height, filling that air with buzzing, dancing and the light of innumerable gauzy wings.

While much of Garland’s narrative is appropriately nostalgic and excels at scene painting, he also applied the lessons he had been culling from his correspondence and promoting through his teaching: that realism required accurate depiction of the unpleasant as well as the beautiful. In “Between Hay an’ Grass,” for example, he interrupted his account of snaring gophers to comment on his own method, what he would later call “veritism.” “I am often profoundly amused at the revelations which come to me in writing reminiscences of this nature,” he noted. “These genre pictures of boy-life in the West are intrinsically of no moment; their interest will be mainly due to the observer and his angle of vision; to one who (like myself) is a product of these scenes and incidents, a word or sentence concerning a common experience will assume great value, while at the same time, those reared among a totally different set of vulgar incidents will be amused merely.”

Toward the end of the final sketch in the series, “Melons and Early Frosts,” Garland addressed specifically the theme he had been building, after describing the gloom of a winter rain:

This farm life it will be seen was attractive, not because of the home-life so much, as because of the superb setting of color and light in the atmosphere and landscape. The farm-houses of the American farmers, East and West, have little in themselves to make them attractive, and it takes but a long cold rain to bring out the terrible contrast of the brilliant landscape on fair days, and the gloom and narrowness of the home-life at all times.

II

“Boy Life on the Prairie” is of considerable interest for readers today for two reasons. First, the articles provide a first-hand account of farm life during an important period of prairie settlement, when farmers were engaged in developing prairie grassland into

productive farms. Presented with a flair for descriptive writing and aimed primarily at Eastern readers who were unfamiliar with the reality of frontier farm life, the articles portray the hard work involved in farming, labor that differed somewhat from that on Eastern farms, as Garland points out several times in the articles. Garland takes his readers through the details of husking corn, threshing wheat, planting crops, and herding cows. His account also demonstrates the value of the work itself: its crucial role in enabling the prairie farmer to carve a new life out of the prairie. Readers will find in these sketches the role of children in making a successful farm, and also the equally necessary labor of the farm wife. But Garland always takes care to point out the moments of keen pleasure in a boy's life: playing games, riding horses, the feel of the soil under bare feet, the delight in observing wildlife, an awareness of the natural cycle of growth and decay.

Second, the sketches are important for their role in the development of Garland's writing and his aesthetic. As he reflected on his boyhood experiences from the standpoint of a 27-year-old city dweller who was then struggling to make ends meet, he remembered mostly the pleasures of his youth amid the Iowa countryside and especially his response to the land. He discovered he had a knack for descriptive writing, and the sketches reveal him growing increasingly more adept at depicting dialogue—his remembrance of his past and his notes about dialect in his travel journal enabled him to overcome the woodenness that had marred his earlier efforts in fiction. When he came to draft the stories by which he is most remembered today, he drew upon what he had learned in writing the “Boy Life” articles: the land is beautiful, nature is bountiful, even ordinary activities such as husking corn, threshing wheat, snaring gophers, and childhood games can and ought to be the subject-matter of art. Six years later he would make these observations the focal point of what he would call “veritism,” a form of realism that blended the realist's insistence upon accuracy of detail with the impressionist's tendency to paint objects as they appear to his individual eye. As he explained succinctly in “Productive Conditions of American Literature,” “My own conception is that realism (or veritism) is the truthful statement of an individual impression corrected by reference to the fact.”¹⁴ Near the end of his life, he explained what he meant to a correspondent: “In truth I was an impressionist in that I presented life and landscape as I personally perceived them but I sought a deeper significance in the use of the word, I added a word which subtended verification. I sought to verify my impressions by comparing impressions separated [by] an interval of time.”¹⁵

The “Boy Life” articles make plain that through them he discovered the value of regional writing as the subject of art. A number of statements in *Crumbling Idols* reveal that the Iowa landscape was never far from his mind as he developed his thinking about how best to express a literature true to his experience:

It is only to the superficial observer that this country seems colorless and dull; to the veritist it is full of burning interest, greatest possibilities.¹⁶

It is a settled conviction with me that each locality must produce its own literary record, each special phase of life utter its own voice. There is no other way for a true local expression to embody itself. The sun of truth strikes each part of the earth at a little different angle; it is this angle which gives life and infinite variety to literature.¹⁷

Write of those things of which you know most, and for which you care most. By so doing you will be true to your-self, true to your locality, and true to your time.¹⁸

In 1899, as part of his contract to deliver five books to Macmillan, his new publisher, he transformed and considerably expanded the articles into a fictional account of a boy's growth and maturation over the course of a year. The resulting book, *Boy Life on the Prairie*, lavishly illustrated with six full-page illustrations and 47 line drawings by the popular illustrator E. M. Deming and accompanied by 32 poems largely drawn from his earlier *Prairie Songs* (1893), would go on to become a steady seller, reprinted and revised for different publishers. This 1899 book version is the account familiar to most readers and scholars, and the original articles have largely faded from the awareness of all but specialists in Garland's career.

The articles are therefore significant for enabling readers to recognize that Garland initially responded most keenly to the landscape of Iowa and to the contrast presented by human habitations surrounded by that landscape. Only later, after he had learned how to develop character, dialogue, and conflict did he discover how to convey his themes through fiction. But central to his artistic vision is his pictorial sense, which is perhaps seen most clearly in the original “Boy Life” articles.

—Keith Newlin

NOTES

- 1 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 81-82.
- 2 Garland, “A Branch Road,” *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 9.
- 3 Garland, “A Branch Road,” 52.
- 4 Garland, “Local Color in Art,” *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1894), 64.
- 5 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 74
- 6 Garland, “The Wife of a Pioneer,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 20 (Sept. 1903), 8.
- 7 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 83.
- 8 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 88.
- 9 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 129.
- 10 2 July 1886; *Selected Letters of Hamlin Garland*, ed. Keith Newlin and Joseph B. McCullough (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 13-14.
- 11 15 July 1886; *Selected Letters*, 16.
- 12 Quoted in Keith Newlin, *Hamlin Garland, A Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 90.
- 13 Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border*, 351.
- 14 Garland, “Productive Conditions of American Literature, *Forum* 27 (Aug. 1894): 690.
- 15 Garland to Eldon Hill, 14 February 1939, *Selected Letters*, 417.
- 16 Garland, “Provincialism,” *Crumbling Idols*, 6.
- 17 Garland, “New Fields,” *Crumbling Idols*, 22.
- 18 Garland, “The Question of Success,” *Crumbling Idols*, 35.

NOTE ON THE TEXTS

This book reprints the original printing of “Boy Life on the Prairie” as it appeared in *American Magazine*:

- “I. The Huskin’,” 7 (January 1888): 299-303;
- “II. The Thrashin’,” 7 (March 1888): 570-77;
- “III. The Voice of Spring,” 7 (April 1888): 684-90;
- “IV. Between Hay an’ Grass,” 8 (June 1888): 148-55;
- “V. Meadow Memories,” 8 (July 1888): 296-303;
- “VI. Melons and Early Frosts,” 8 (October 1888): 712-17.

I have retained the sometimes idiosyncratic punctuation but have silently corrected a few obvious typographic errors. To aid readers in understanding more fully Garland’s description of farm methods and implements, as well as his occasional allusions, I have provided annotations in a separate section at the end of the book, keyed to page number.

SUBSEQUENT PUBLISHING HISTORY

Six years after the “Boy Life” sketches were published, Garland was prompted to write an additional installment to support a new magazine dedicated to celebrating the writing of the Midwest—“Boy Life in the West—Winter,” *Midland Monthly* 1 (Feb. 1894): 113-22. Because this later sketch repeats some of the material in the original series—chiefly description of boyhood games—I have chosen not to include it here.

In 1899, as part of his contract with his new publisher, Macmillan, Garland substantially reworked the sketches, using them as the basis for a new fictional presentation of Iowa boy life, and considerably expanding them with new scenes and events, to which were also added thirty-two poems from *Prairie Songs* (1893), which had gone out of print, and six full-page illustrations and forty-seven line drawings by the popular illustrator E. M. Deming. When *Boy Life on the Prairie* (New York: Macmillan, 1899) appeared, it became a popular seller and was reprinted in 1907, revised in 1908, reprinted again in 1922 and 1924, and substantially abridged and revised in 1926 for the Academy Classics for Junior High Schools series, published by Allyn and Bacon.

I. THE HUSKIN’

SOURCES FOR QUOTATIONS FACING JON MORRIS’S PHOTOGRAPHS ARE:

Boy Life on the Prairie. New York: Macmillan, 1899.

Crumbling Idols. Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1894.

Main-Travelled Roads. New York: Macmillan, 1899.

Prairie Folks. Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1893.

Prairie Songs. Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1893.

A Son of the Middle Border. New York: Macmillan, 1917.

A Spoil of Office. Boston: Arena, 1892.

Poets and other individuals have adequately set forth the “corn-huskin’” of olden time, and in prose or rhyme have told us about the gathering in the old barn, of the merry lads and the red-cheeked lasses who blushed the rosier when the red ear of corn was found; of the candles set in hollow “punkins”; of the dough-nuts and the cider, and all the rest of the old-fashioned paraphernalia, which is getting slightly conventional to the Eastern mind, and wholly so to the Western.

I venture to present, therefore, the latest phases of corn-husking in the West, though daunted at the outset by the doubting word of a friend who says “Oh! There isn’t any poetry in such wholesale methods of corn gathering.” I answer him by saying, “There is for me, and there will be for many others who, like myself, grew up amid it and took part in it.”

In the great corn-growing States, like Illinois and Iowa, it is no small part of the year’s work to husk the corn, or “shuck it,” as they say a little further South. Each farmer has a field running from forty to a hundred or two hundred acres: “None o’ y’r little patches,” he will tell you scornfully, “but a field.” Of course the methods used in harvesting such large fields have to be wholly different from the old-time cutting and hauling to the barn.

Along toward the last of September or first of October, these fields get dry and yellow, by the combined action of the frosty nights and the clear days of fall. Oh, those matchless autumn days, when the vast plain is wrapt in a shimmering robe of mist; when the sun rises red as wine in cloudless skies each day, its splendor veiled by the thick smoky air! The whole scene and its emotions come back to me as I write.

I am again amid the corn, with the soft and lonesome rustle of its leaves around me. I hear the imperial voice of the crane as he wheels in the very flaming door of the sun, far beyond the reach of eye; flights of noisy blackbirds stream past, and myriads of ground-birds banding together for the winter, rise around me like bees.

The potatoes are dug, the teams have nearly finished ploughing the stubble ground, and we are beginning on the corn husking. The mornings are frosty, but the noons are warm and the flies remorseless on those poor horses who are yet ploughing, though these we are using as we husk are protected in a measure by the leaves of the corn.

The sun, nearly vertical,
drops a flood of dazzling
light and heat upon the field
over which the cool shadows
run, only to make the heat
seem the more intense.

*"Among the Corn Rows,"
Main-Travelled Roads*



But the reader will ask for particulars of the husking; and rightly, for he cannot be expected to take much intelligent interest in the work until he knows more about it. The Iowa farmer does not cut his corn and haul it to the barn as in the East. With one or two hundred acres to harvest, it is impossible to do anything of the kind. He simply finishes his ploughing and digs his potatoes, letting his corn ripen on the stalk. There it stands—a forest of tall stalks turning yellow: first at the tips of the leaves; next, the whole leaf grows sear and rustles; then the ear droops; the stalk itself becomes yellow at the top: but even when the tide of green is sunk below the ear, this is not yet hard enough to “crib.” Finally when it no longer feels damp or “creaks” if wrung, the corn is ready to husk, and work begins.

Perhaps September still lingers during this, and while part of the teams go on with the ploughing or the hired men are “changing works” for the threshing, “we boys” are set at work. Early in the morning, I remember, we used to drive forth into the field. John, the youngest, had the privilege of driving thither, with the “sulky plow,” while Frank and I, each with a team, rattled into the corn, running a race when out of the sight of father.

We each had a large wagon drawn by two horses. The box on the wagon was capable of holding fifty bushels of husked ears, and was two or three feet higher on the “off-side,” which was called the “banger-board,” and served to keep the corn from flying over, as we threw it. Each of us took two rows beside the wagon, and on the “nigh” side; which brought the right hand to the box and permitted throwing the ear on it while reaching for the next one with the left hand—a great advantage where one husks much. The horses all the time traveled the rows of corn, astride the last husked row. I precede, for Frank being the better husker, is able to push me across the field.

We must fill our boxes before dinner, and with a whoop we attack the ears and thump! thump! thump! they fall into the empty box. The horses are old stagers and know how to stop and start without orders, the reins being tied to the side of the wagon. And didn’t they enjoy those days? They could eat all the time; the stalks were yet juicy, and the ears in easy reach. They always got fat during the fall, and we did not scruple to run races to and from the field, shouting like demons and applying a cornstalk to the glossy hides of our animals.

The Eastern reader will at once see that we couldn’t “go fool’n’ around with no corn-knife, nor husk nor corn in the shock.” We had to “git out in the mornin’ an’ hump ourselves every day f’r two munce.” Indeed there *were* men who husked corn all winter long, but they were considered “shiftless” fellows.

So, day after day, Frank and I used to husk corn, while John ran the riding plough and father did the chores and bossed. John was accustomed to say that it was “darn easy to boss, but ’taint so much fun t’ set on this ol’ plough every day.” But we said that *he* had no cause to howl, for the reason that he carried an umbrella to keep the sun off, and made frequent trips to the melon-patch—in fact the little tool-box on his plough was seldom without a fragrant cantaloupe or juicy “peerless.” And as a matter of strict fact we did not fail to have a like provision against getting too dry.

But alas! This is only the bright side of the story. The marvelous days passed. The blackbirds went south. The ducks and geese began to sail in on the cooler winds. The mornings grew frostier and the sun rose later, causing us many a time to arrive in the field before his vast red disk rose above the wide horizon. The leaves of the corn, ceaselessly whipped by the powerful, sounding, southern wind, began to look ragged and drop to the ground. The stalks, heavy with their burden of ears, also bent, and in some cases fell prone to the earth, thus increasing the number of the “down ears.”

Our hands became chapped and sore, and the frosty air made covering for them a necessity. We therefore wore “husking gloves,” which are adorned with steel plates and hooks for tearing the husks off the ear. To husk eighty or a hundred bushels of corn each day, one must make every movement count.

The wrists get tired; the fingers, worn to the quick at their tips, required “cots.” As the fall went on, the gloves wore out at the fingers, and, being wet through in the days when it rained or when the frost was thick, they dried hard as boards and cracked.

Oh, those days! Long before the cold, gray dawn had lighted the room, father’s voice rang sternly out: “Hello-o-o, boys! Roll out! Daylight down the crick!” Then stiff and sore we scrambled out of bed, and, seated on the edge, rubbed our sleepy eyes and yawned ourselves awake.

The roosters were crowing, the cattle stirring around the barn and the yard. The air was still as death, and the smoke from the fire went straight up into it. The frost lay white as silver on the crisp grass. From all the farms around came the sounds of the morning; the curry-comb in the hands of “Cajer” could be heard banging against the side of the barn as he knocked the dirt and dandruff out.

And oh! those dawns! when the morning psalm of the threshing-machine began its low, musical bass note, and the ringing call of the bell-metal pinion, and the ceaseless cackling

To go from the dusty field of the prairie farms to the wood shadows and to the cool murmuring of water, to strip stark to the caressing winds, and to plunge in the deeps of the dappled pools, was like being born again.

Boy Life on the Prairie



of the barnyard fowls made harmony with it. And then a half-hour later, after washing briskly at the barn, with what appetites we sat down to our sausages and buckwheat flap-jacks, I leave the reader to judge. To this day, when the smell of fresh pork or sausage comes to me it brings up those scenes. I hear the cook down below, and the pleasant “sizz-sizz sizz-sizzle” of the meat in the pan; I see again the long knife as it glides under the immense disks, the deft turn of the wrist, and the flap-jack with its browned side uppermost coming down with a slap.

We sat down to those cakes with a relish born of certainty. “You won’t get anything more till noon, boys; so fill up!” We flopped the brown, steaming disks on our plates two at a time, poured some of the delicious fat (filled with the juice of the sausage) over them, laid them together, poured syrup made of sugar over all, and downed them with satisfaction. This was our only “course;” in fact we had never heard of a dinner with courses. Coffee and doughnuts finished the meal. Then, ho! for the field, though it was not yet fairly light. By this time of the month the ground was frozen and ploughing impossible, so that all hands were at the husking. October was wearing away, the winds were cold, and flurries of snow to be expected.

The “down ears” were likely to be covered with snow by the first of November, and the “boss” was anxious to get as much done as possible before that came. How hard it was for us boys to get limbered up those frosty mornings, when the keen wind searched us through and through, and when our gloves were stiff and our hands cracked and sore! The frost soon made not only our gloves wet, but also our knees and arms, while the frozen earth, softened at noon, stuck to the feet, till great masses of mud and leaves had to be wearily dragged along.

We kept three teams at work now, Frank and the hired man each having one, while little John, father, and I drove the third. I had two rows on the nigh side and father two on the off side, and little John “brought up the down row”—that is, the row over which the wagon was obliged to pass. John groaned often and shed some tears when the morning was cold or wet. Poor little man! It *was* hard. He could barely keep up the down row by strenuous exertion anyhow, and when the cold, the frost, and the mud conspired against him, it was hard indeed.

And then came days later on, when gray, jagged masses of cloud swept down on the powerful northern wind, when there was a lonesome eerie sound amid the corn rows,

and the cranes, no longer soaring in a warm, sensuous air, drove straight into the south, sprawling, low-hung on the wind, or lost to sight above the flying clouds.

The ducks in myriads now streamed along the sky, stopping upon the wheat-stubble to feed, warily rising and falling before alighting. Some geese also stopped, but most of them went sweeping by on the tearing wind, their bodies aslant and necks stretched out, as though trying to go yet faster to the warm bayous of a glittering tropic sea. We boys used to long to go with them, and leave the cold and hardship which they looked down upon.

But the cheery voice of father or the taunts of an older brother and the hired man about a momentary stiffness in the tired wrists would start us tearfully at work again. The only thing which sustained us on such days was the anticipation of the warm fire and hot dinner at noon. At the end of those almost interminable rows was an hour’s rest and dinner; and so we struggled on, not daring to look farther ahead than just that goal.

As I write, I have in mind one Thanksgiving Day. A cold, bitter day it was. The snow and sleet fell, at intervals rattling in among the stalks with a mournful howl and a rustling sound almost as drear as the voice of the wind. The clouds seemed to leap across the dull, gray sky, torn and ragged, and rolling and spreading like the action of a tempest. The ground was frozen hard as iron, and the wagon rumbled and clattered over the lumps and furrows. All the down ears were sealed up with ice and lumps of frozen earth; and the stalks, ice-armored on the north side, creaked dismally as the stern blast bent them.

There was no holiday for us. Snow was imminent, and the corn must be husked. So there we were, with great ragged coats belted around us, our sore thumbs well covered with “cots” which mother had made for us, our feet muffled in extra socks, and boots covered with fleece-lined over-shoes—and yet the cold found us! The heat of our hands melted the ice we touched, wetting our gloves or mittens through to the skin. The wind cut its way to our breasts under the lapels of our coats; and stamp and swing our feet as we might, the toes would get numb.

Oh! how we longed for the dinner-hour that day! For, though we had no holiday, we were to have turkey. It *did* seem as though that box held a thousand bushels if one! And the hired man took a malicious delight in taunting us with lacking grit. But the hour came at last, and when we reached the end of the row we “scud” for the house like rabbits. We “yanked” off our coats two or three feet deep, flung our wet mittens under the stove, washed our chapped and chafed chins in a dish of warm water, and then curled up by

The pale red sun was
shooting light through the
leaves, and warming the
boles of the great oaks that
stood in the yard . . .

"A Branch Road," Main-Travelled Roads



the stove, resisting all efforts to get us away till the turkey was set on the table. Then we went for that noble bird, without ceremony and without mercy. We ate until father said we “must ’a be’n holler clear to the heels.” We let out another reef in our pantaloons, and answered him by asking for another leg. O, steaming turkey! O, roaring fire! The wind lost its terrors as we sat beside these inestimable comforts.

But there was another side to this picture also, which the realist cannot leave out. The turkey and the fire served to show us how very cold we had been. A fit of shivering came on which the stove could not quell. Our fingers swelled to twice their natural size and their worn tips grew more and more painful, and our backs grew stiff as though we were ninety. Our boots, which we had incautiously pulled off to warm our feet, we could not pull on again.

We wept and shivered and swore we would not go out; but it was of no use, the corn must be finished that day. If we all worked (with the help of a neighbor) we could finish the last of the hundred-acre field. Father, a stern, incisive man, allowed no demurrers, and so we struggled into our boots by means of flour in the heels together with soap; softened up the mittens; belted on our several old coats, the collars of which sawed our chins unmercifully; tumbled ourselves at last into the wagon which the men had unloaded, and away we went against the piercing wind. The God of Gold keep me from another such experience! is my prayer.

O, that wind! Its wild, stormful moan is in my ear now as I write. I can feel the snow dash against my cheek, feel the tingling of my fingers and the rasping of my coat around my blue, chafed neck. But the men whoop merrily, and father cheers us by shouting, “The last day, boys. Only twenty rows more!” And we struggled on, counting the rows and watching the golden and orange heaps of corn rising slowly in the box.

Chubby little John scrambles along on the down row, the tears on his cheeks; getting too far behind at times to throw into the box—then father goes back and helps him on. The men yell to keep their courage up. Rover dashes here and there after rabbits. The horses shiver under their blankets, and need careful watching. Meanwhile the wind roars through the field, carrying with it showers of feathery snow, shreds of the corn-leaves, the dried silk and the tender white husks.

Slowly the night falls, and the field is not done. It grows dark—we are on our last row, but the end is not yet reached. John has developed a sort of desperate energy and keeps up to the end-board, which he beats at times with an ear of corn to let us know he is there. Father shouts at him not to leave any ears—an insinuation which he repels, but I suspect he leaves a

good many. It is now so dark that the lamps are lighted in a neighbor’s house, and the snow is falling fast. We are racing for the end, Frank leading the lot. I am on the outside, and one of my rows runs out. I go back to help John, and we push on hard after the other teams.

John “plays it” on father by going up and helping him; father not seeing me help John.

All at once an ear-splitting yell announces that Frank has reached the end. The rest echo it, and we all press on. “Cajer” lets off a howl as he comes out, which would raise the hair of a timid man—and then in the snow and darkness we all yell “HOORAY!”

The corn is husked!

Then came the race home in the dark and the attack on the steaming supper in the kitchen, whence the warm, red light streamed through the falling snow as we drove up. How the men joked and roared with laughter as we all sat around the table and exhibited our ferocious appetites as marvelously as though no turkey had disappeared down our throats at noon.

After the supper, little John and I flatly rebelled. We wouldn’t stir from the fire, come what would. John, I remember, said he was going to get warm if it took all night. Therefore, he put a stick of wood on the oven to keep his heels off the hot iron, and settled down with an air like that of Roderick Dhu (or was it the Saxon?)—

Come one, come all! this rock shall fly
From its firm base as soon as I.

I sat on the other side of the stove in a similar manner; and oh! didn’t we smile to hear the sound of the men cribbing the corn, out in the snow. “Let ’m go it,” said John, venomously; “they c’n stand it.”

Sometimes now, when I sit at my desk in the city, a man in the street will shovel coal into a spout to somebody’s cellar; and instantly I am back beside that stove, listening to the ringing sound which the corn makes as it leaves the scoop: first a little rumble and rattle—that is the shovel being pushed along the box under the corn—next, that ringing scrape, as the hard ears leave the steel; then the faint crash of the corn as it strikes in the crib and slides down into position.

Or, I am out there, holding the lantern while father shovels and picks out seed-corn; my teeth chattering with the chill air, while my brain is trying to figure out the number of scoopfuls remaining in the box. Curious, what a value all of those things have to me

The pleasure of re-creating in the image of nature is the
artist's unfailing reward.

"The Local Novel," Crumbling Idols



II. THE THRASHIN’

now! It would seem as if I had never suffered then; that there was only enjoyment. This is the work of that master of all art and poetry, *Time*, that has mellowed and softened those experiences. He has taken the sting out of the wind, the wet out of the poor ragged mittens, and the stiffness out of the bones.

And all night long we lie in sleep
Too sweet to sigh in or to dream,
Not caring how the wild winds sweep
Or snow-clouds through the darkness stream
Above the trees that moan and cry,
And clutch with naked hands the sky.
Beneath our checkered counterpane
We sleep the soundlier for the storm;
Its wrath is only lullaby,
A far-off, dim and vast refrain.

As I think of the exquisite delight of cuddling down in the bed that Thanksgiving night I cannot keep that verse of Whitcomb Riley out of my head:

So tired you can’t lay flat enough
And sort o’ wish that you could spread
Out like molasses on the bed,
And jest drip off the aidges in
The dreams that never come ag’in.

And then in the morning to sleep on, regardless of the call of father; sleep on till just in time to take a hand in the attack on the flap-doodles again. Outside, the day was like a Sabbath, still and bright. The snow lay white on everything; but the corn was husked, so what did we care. After breakfast we put on our best clothes and started to school, without waiting for our fingers to get well; proclaiming to all we met that it was too late in the fall to husk corn.

Life on an Iowa farm had its compensations. There were times when the daily routine of lonely and monotonous toil gave place to an agreeable change, for a few days at least; when the young men of the neighborhood got together in their daily work, and mingled some recreation with the toil. Such an occasion was the “thrashin’ season.”

All the fall, we younger boys had herded the cattle on the clover or followed the plough around the great, lonesome field, till we were tired of the regular routine, and longed for the coming of winter to freeze the ground and cover the grass with snow. In the midst of this dull progress of the fall work, the gathering of the threshing crew with the machinery rattling and banging, constituted a great event.

There have been great changes in the methods of threshing since I was a lad, and the progress from the flail to the ponderous traction engine of the wheat-fields of Dakota is a most fascinating study. However, I aim at giving only a few pictures of fall-work on the prairie farm in “old times,” which, in the language of the swiftly changing West, means twenty-five years ago.

In those days the grain was cut by means of a hand-rake reaper, and afterward was stacked around the barn ready to be threshed, and the straw piled up as shelter for the cattle.

Being in place for threshing, the grain often stood till late in the fall before the operation began, while the farmer was doing his other fall work. Of course some farmer was threshing “a settin’ or two” earlier in the season, for all could not thresh at the same time, and a good part of the fall labor therefore was “changing works” with the neighbors, thus laying up a stock of unpaid labor ready for the home job. That is, Jones would help Shelby, Johnson, Jenks and other farmers of the neighborhood, in order that when he came to thresh, Johnson, Jenks and Shelby would help him. Therefore, all the fall, father and the hired hand shouldered their forks in the crisp and early dawn and went threshing.

And so all through the months of October and November, the ceaseless ringing hum and “boo-woo-ow-ow-oo-oommm” of the great bell-metal balance-wheels of the threshing machines, and the deep, base hum of the ramping cylinder as its motion rose and fell, could be heard on every side; the superb morning-song of the season.

Perhaps I cannot better treat of this event than by telling of one of the very earliest threshing seasons I can remember. For weeks we boys had looked forward to the time with

The wind had gone down,
and the red sunlight fell
mistily over the world of corn
and stubble. The crickets
were still chirping and the
feeding cattle were drifting
toward the farmyards. The
day had been made beautiful
by human sympathy.

"A Day's Pleasure," Main-Travelled Roads



the greatest eagerness, and during the whole of the appointed day we hung on the gate and gazed down the road to see the machine come up the lane. But it did not come. Still we would not give it up, and at the falling of dusk had not given it up, but ate our bread and milk in momentary expectation of hearing it coming, notwithstanding the hired man said that it had “probberly got stuck in the mud.” A score of times we ran to the window to see if we could not catch a glimpse of it, or hear the rattle of the wheels and traps. It was not uncommon for the sturdy men who attended these machines to work all day at one place, and then move to another at night. They might not come till four o’clock in the morning, father said; and we were sorrowfully starting to climb the “wooden hill” when we heard the peculiar rattle of the “separator” and the voices of the McTurg boys singing.

“There they are!” said father, getting the old square lantern and lighting the candle within. The air was sharp and our boots were off; therefore we could only stand at the window and watch father as he went out to show them where to set the machine; the dim light throwing fantastic shadows, here and there; now lighting up a face, and now bringing out a glimpse of the horses blowing the steam in white clouds from their distended nostrils. The men’s voices sounded sharply in the still air, and the roused turkeys in the cotton-woods peered about on their perches, black against the sky.

We would gladly have stayed up (or down) to greet Uncle David and William McTurg, but were lured off to bed by mother, who said we must go to sleep in order to be up early in the morning. But as we lay there in our beds under the sloping rafted roof, we could hear the “hand” riding off furiously to tell some of the neighbors that the threshers had come. We could hear the loud, clear voices of the men, and the squawk of the fated hens as father snatched them from their perches and wrung their innocent necks. With the crash of the machinery being unloaded sounding in our ears, and watching the play of the lights and shadows cast by the lantern upon the plastered wall, we fell asleep.

How well I remember that next morning! I hear again the ringing beat of the iron sledge as the huge muscles of the McTurgs drive the stakes to hold the “power.” The rattle of chains, the clash of rods, the ring of iron bars and the laughter and snatches of song, I hear. I smell again the sausages being fried in the kitchen, and hear the rapid tread of the women as they hurry the breakfast forward. It is not yet red in the east, and I have a strange sense of being awakened to a new world. But not the cheerful noise outside nor the smell of the breakfast can keep my heavy eyelids up, and I doze off to sleep again.

When we got down to breakfast the men had eaten and were out in the stack-yard at work. Ah! that morning scene, that superb sky and air! As I write, I am once more in the faint gray light of the dawn; the frost lies white as silver on every surface; the frozen ground rings like iron under the steel-shod feet of the horses. The breath of men and beasts rises in white puffs of cloud. The men slap their arms upon their breasts, or roll one another on the ground to keep warm, with loud halloes and laughter. The threshers in their oily brown suits are busy about the machine, standing a cold and silent mass in the half-light. The “hands” begin to get to their places, and others are seen dimly, coming across the fields. The young men are all anxiously expecting the first sound that is to rouse the morning. The older men, in rough clothing, stand in groups and talk politics and prices of wheat.

Finally, just as the east begins to bloom, and long streamers to unroll along the vast gray dome, one Joe Gilman—“Shouting Joe”—mounts one of the tall stacks, and throwing down the sheaf that caps it, lifts his voice in the old familiar way. On a still morning like this, his “Chippeway war-whoop” can be heard three miles. Long drawn and musical, it spreads out in all directions, “Whoo-ee whoooo-oo-oo-oop!” And the answer comes back faintly from the surrounding hills of the little *coulé*, while the men shout approval. It is also echoed by the laggards, whose dim figures can be seen hurrying across the field to the work. And so Joe calls down, “All right!” and the machine begins to move, and the “hands” are soon in place and busy—they are always busy around the McTurgs.

The machine was a “J. I. Case” or a “Buffalo Pitts,” I do not remember which; and was moved by five spans of horses attached to a “power” staked to the ground, around which they traveled to the left, pulling at the ends of long levers or “sweeps.” The “power” was staked some rods away from the machine, to which the force was carried by means of “tumbling rods.” The driver stood upon a platform above the huge cog-wheels around which the horses moved; and a great figure he was in my eyes as he chirped and whistled and yelled encouragingly to the teams.

It looked like “a soft snap,” but it wasn’t: it was very tiresome to stand there all through every long day during the fall. On cold days, when the wind roared down over the hills and swept the dust and leaves along the road, it was pleasanter to sit on the south side of the stack, as we boys did, and watch him. But the driver had also to be a man of good judgment in his special work, as the motion must be kept just at the right

The sun of truth strikes each
part of the earth at a little
different angle; it is this angle
which gives life and infinite
variety to literature.

"New Fields," Crumbling Idols



speed for the grain entering, and this motion of the cylinder he must gauge by the pitch of its deep-bass hum.

There were three men who went with a machine, and were the “threshers” proper. One was the driver just mentioned: the others were the “feeders,” one of whom was always feeding the grain into the roaring, howling cylinder, while the other, oil-can in hand, was “tending separator.” The feeder’s position was the one we boys aspired to most, as we used to stand in silent admiration and watch the easy, powerful swing of David McTurg, while he caught the bundles under his arm, and with a steady, measured, easeful swing, rolled them out over his elbow till they formed an endless belt of entering wheat, cut and drawn and beaten by the terrible power of the iron-toothed monster within.

Sometimes the feeder would take us up on his stand, where we could see the cylinder, which always frightened us, while the flying wheat stung our faces. Sometimes the driver would take us on the power to watch the horses go round, but we soon got dizzy there, and then he would take us up in his arms, and running out along the moving sweep, toss us with a laugh into the arms of the tender.

The machine howls, the dust flies, the whip cracks and the men work like beavers to get the bundles to the machine, and to get the straw and wheat away from the “tail-end.” We boys, not yet old enough to hold sacks for the measurer (which we fear with an enormous dread), are here and there and everywhere, revelling in the jokes, the scuffling, the noise, the activity extraordinary. The wind blows cold and the clouds go flying across the bright blue sky, the straw glistens in the sun, the amber wheat pulses out at the side below the fanning mill, and the men in the straw pile wallow to their waists in the chaff and threshed yellow straws no longer straight as arrows.

Ah! that straw pile! what delight we had in that! what fun to go up on the top where the four or five men were covering and banking up the shed with the soft warm stack. Here the men toss straw upon us and bury our slight bulk in the depths of a single forkful, from which we come to the surface in a rage and out of breath.

We laugh at the man at the tail of the “stacker,” where he stands in the midst of the thick dust and flying chaff, and tirelessly takes and tosses away the endless cataract of straw. As he laughs down at the feeder his teeth shine like a negro’s out of his dust-blackened face. He motions for more straw, and the feeder motions for more speed, and the driver swings his lash and yells at the straining horses; the pitchers “buckle to it,” the band-cutter slashes

madly away, the wheat rolls out a “stream as big as a leg,” the carriers trot back and forth from the granary like mad and whoop back at the pitchers like savages, and the measurer “jest humps hisself,” while we little chaps laugh and dance to see the fun.

Being tired with wallowing in the straw and with turning somersaults therein, we used to sit down and plan our attack upon the straw-pile in the morning when soft and bright as gold, warm with the sun, it stood all ready to our hands. I know I shall have unnumbered sympathizers when I name the straw-pile and the glorious times we used to have in it: how we tunneled it till it was a sort of catacomb: how we made passages from the top to the bottom and from the circumference to the centre: how we built caves in the very heart of that stack, to which we could descend, like buck-shot through a tin tube, by plunging headforemost into a “well” at the top.

Lying in the sun on the top of the new straw we planned how we would astonish the neighbor’s boys when they came over to play a game of “hi! spy”: how we’d just dodge into the “big hole” and go to the top, then into the “slide,” which would bring us like a drop of a hat at the “gool” under the “blinder’s” very nose.

Lying thus and looking down on the threshing crew, it all seemed play to us. The horses with their straining out-thrust necks, the loud and cheery shouts and whistling of the driver, the roar and hum of the machine, the flourish of forks and brawny arms, the shouts of the workmen to each other, all blending in with the wild scream of the wind above our heads in the creaking branches of the oak, were simply for us to hear and to enjoy.

Wh-r-r-r BANG! something has gone into the cylinder, making the feeder dodge to escape the flying teeth, and the men rush to the horses to stop the machine. We all get a rest now, while the men put in some new teeth. At such times two or three of the young fellows are sure to have a wrestle or a lifting match, and all kinds of chaff fly about. The man in the straw leans insolently on his fork and asks the feeder sarcastically if that’s the best he c’n do, and remarks that he’s gett’n’ chilly—guess he’ll haf t’ go home ’n’ git his kid gloves t’ keep fr’m freez’n’. To this, David McTurg laughingly responds that he’ll warm his carcass with a rope, if he don’t shut up. All of which gives the boys infinite delight. But the work soon begins again.

There was not a little joking that day about the extraordinary number of times the oil can had to be carried to the kitchen fire and warmed by Len Robbins. When David

The timothy heads, sinking,
shook out a fragrant, purple
dust . . .

Boy Life on the Prairie



. . . when he came opposite
the house, it was less familiar
than he had hoped. The trees
had grown prodigiously. The
Lombardys towered far over
the house and barn. The wall
was shaded by the maples he
had planted, and the wind-
break had become a grove.
Something mystical had gone
out of it all.

Boy Life on the Prairie

McTurg was tending and Len feeding, that can was all right, but the moment that Len was tending separator, it congealed in the most surprising way. The rest said that when two or three neighbors' girls were in there helping the matron of the house, the can *always* acted that way with Len, even in the warmest days of September. Len laughed and said, "Don't you wish y' might, boys?" and triumphantly flourished a half-eaten dough-nut in their faces.

When the call for dinner sounded, it was a stirring sight for us to see the men race in the unhitching, in order to be first at the watering-trough and in the house, and it was a sight to make a fastidious man weep to see them crowd around the table, dusty and noisy, invariably showing that their efforts to remove the dirt behind their ears and under their chins had been lamentably ineffectual. This was always especially true of the man at the stacker, who gloried in the dirt, which was clean dirt and showed who did the work, he said.

And the way they "went for" the boiled potatoes and chicken was absolutely appalling to stingy men. One cut on a potato, and *one, two, presto!* it was gone! Grimy fingers grasped a leg of chicken, one or two grips at it and it was bare as a slate pencil. As the boys waited, it seemed as though there could not be anything of the chicken left at all for the second table: but there was. Chickens were cheap.

In the short day of October there is no nooning, and as soon as the horses finish their oats, the howl and hum of the machine begins again, and continues steadily all the afternoon. We boys and Rover pay strict attention to the rats that inhabit the bottom of the stacks. Great is the excitement in our several breasts as the bouncing big rascals begin to be unhoused. We pound and scream half in fear and half in that strange savage delight a boy has in killing anything; and few are the individual rats that escape our combined efforts.

By and by the night begins to fall, the wind to die down; and through the rising dust and the falling gloom the machine booms steadily with a new sound, a sort of sullen weary roar, rising at times into a rattling yell as the cylinder runs empty. The men working silently now, loom dim and strange, the pitchers on the stack, the giant feeder on the platform, and especially the workers in the high straw-pile, seem afar off to our childish eyes. The gray dust covers the faces of those near by, hanging to whiskers and eye-brows till we hardly know them, while the measurer can no longer be distinctly seen as the dust rises and falls about him.

Then we hear the cheery welcome cry, "*t-u-r-nn o-o-ut!*" The men raise glad answers, and throw aside their forks. Next comes the gradual slowing down of motion, while the driver calls in an indescribable soothing tone: "Who-o, lads; steady, boys! Ho-o-o, lads!" But they have been going on so long and so steadily that they check their speed with difficulty. The men slide from the stacks, and seizing the ends of the sweeps hold them; but even after the power is still, the cylinder goes on, until the feeder, calling for a sheaf, throws it into its open throat, choking it into silence.

Then comes the sound of dropping chains and iron rods, and the ring of cheery words out of the dusk. The horses walk with languid gait and weary down-thrust heads, to the barn. The men are more silent and leisurely now than in preparing for dinner, washing with greater care and brushing the dust from their clothes and beards. The air is chill, and they don their coats, which, though ragged and yellow on the shoulders, give the table a more orderly appearance.

This evening meal used to be a very attractive one to me. There was the table, capable of holding food and dishes for thirteen or fifteen men. The chairs were eked out always by boards laid on stools or saw-horses; the table loaded with substantial food and lighted with a kerosene lamp; the clean white linen, the shining dishes, and the women flying about with steaming platters—all seemed very satisfactory in those days, and still more so when a few years later I took a man's place at pitching, and came with aching muscles and a fainting stomach into the light and warmth of the supper-room.

There was always a good deal of cheer and fun at the supper, but it was more subdued than at the dinner hour. The young fellows had their jokes, of course, and watched the girls attentively, while the old fellows discussed the day's yield of grain or the matters of the township or county.

There was brisk rattle of implements, and the time-worn jokes about some people being great hands with the fork at the table, and such remarks as: "If she waits on Joe before me again, I'll go home," etc. Some of the men clamored for tea, and when it was brought would not take it, but made the girls put it down for them over their shoulders, which invariably brought out from some one else the words (spoken to make the girls blush and sputter) "Ha! Did y' see that? Had her arm around Len's neck—did, for a fact!"

The pie and dough-nuts and the coffee disappeared faster than any dew could in sunshine, which pleased the women folks immensely; nothing would have offended them

Deep as the breast of a man, wide as the sea, heavy-headed, supple-stocked, many-voiced, full of multitudinous, secret, whispered colloquies,—a meeting place of winds and of sunlight,—our fields ran to the world's end.

A Son of the Middle Border



more than an indifference to their cooking. The men in those days were all, or nearly all, neighbors' boys, or "hands" that were like members of the family; hardly any foreigners then. The whole company knew each other, and the men were treated more like visitors than as hired help. No one feared a rudeness from the other.

After supper, the men withdrew to do the chores and to rub down their horses, and when they were gone the women folks and the youngsters ate their supper, while two or three of the young "hands" sat around the room and made the most interesting remarks they could think of to the girls. I used to think they were stupid, but the girls seemed to like what they had to say.

After we had eaten our supper, it was a great pleasure to go out to the barn and shed (so wonderfully changed to our childish minds by the new stack of straw), and, while the men curried the tired horses, listen to the stories or jolly jesting of the threshers. The horses munch away at their hay, too tired to move a muscle otherwise, enjoying the rubbing which the men give them with wisps of straw held in each hand; the lantern throws a dim red light on the glossy coats and gleaming eyes of the horses and upon the active figures of the men, and even brings out at times the figures of the hens at the farther end of the straw shed. The stable is roofed with straw, and long and narrow. We can hear mice rustling in the straw over-head, while from the farther end of the dimly lighted shed comes the regular *strim-stram*, *strim-stram* of the streams of milk falling into the bottoms of the tin pails, as father and the "hand" milk the contented cows. They peer around occasionally from behind the legs of a cow, to laugh at the fun of the threshers or to put in a word of badinage.

All this is very momentous to us, as we sit on the oat-box there, shivering in the cold air, which the breath of the cattle cannot rob of a certain penetrating power. When we go toward the house the wind is still, the stars are out, and the flame-colored crescent moon lies far down in the deep west. The frost already glistens on the fences and on the well-curb. High in the air, dark against the sky, the turkeys roost uneasily, as if feeling a premonition of coming doom. Rover patters along by our side on the crisp grass, and we wonder if his feet are not cold; his nose certainly is when it touches us.

The light seems to welcome us as it streams from the windows, and how warm and bright the kitchen is with its merry voices and smiling faces, where the women are moving to and fro, and chattering even more busily than they work! Two or three of the neighbors' girls are within, and fun is imminent.

But the crowning part of this "old-fashioned thrashin' season" came after the supper was over and the table cleared out of the way. By that time the men had returned to the house, and were ready for an evening of sport. The neighbors' boys were in no hurry to go home; they knew what was coming.

Around the fire in the roomy kitchen the men sat and told stories, while the girls dodged in and out about their evening work. Ah, with what speechless content we boys used to sit and listen to the stories of bears and Indians and "logging on the Wisconsin," and other tales of the same picturesque flavor! And then, finally, after much beseeching, the violin was brought out and the McTurg boys played. Strange, how those giant hands could supple to the strings and the bow! All day they had been handling the fierce straw, or were covered with the grease and dirt of the machine. Yet now the great dark eyes of David grew tender, and the face rapt, as he drew from the violin weird, wild strains—he did not know their names:—thrilling Norse folk-songs; Swedish dances and love-songs, mournful, sensuous, and seductive: voluptuous waltzes, full of a melancholy, almost terrible passion; not joyous ever.

I could not understand, in my youth, why these "dance tunes" had that peculiar quality—that pleading, wildly sweet and seductive nature—instead of heartland sunny liveliness. (It is clearer to me now.) Then I could only listen with the same pleasure as the others, and wonder at the genius of the musician. There he sat in his greasy and dusty clothes, his eyes inflamed by the beards and dust which the cylinder all day had been beating into his face, his great bushy head of hair still showing traces of the chaff and dirt; and yet the glow of the musician was in his rapt expression, transforming him into a stranger to us all; far above us all.

And then came the inevitable call for "The Fisherman's Hornpipe" and "The Devil's Dream," to which Joe Gilman jiggged with an energy and abandon only to be equalled by a genuine darky end-man. Sometimes, if there were enough for a set they all took places for "The Fireman's Dance" or "Money Musk." And then the boys went home with the girls in the bright starlight, to rise the next dawn for renewed labors.

Oh! those rare days and rarer nights, how bright they were then and how mellow they are growing now, as the slow-paced years drop a golden mist between, which softens angularities and hides the mean and trivial! They grew ever brighter and more regrettable as the methods changed, for unquestionably an element was therein which

In the elm's dark shadow,
In murmur of dream and of sleep
It drowsily eddied and swirled,
And softly crept and curled
Round the out-thrust knees
Of the white-wood trees . . .

"By the River," Prairie Songs



is not to be found in the threshing season of the present time. As we moved farther out into the prairie of Iowa, farther into the great wheat-raising land, the whole method underwent much change. The power became a “mounted power,” a twelve-horse power, a stationary engine, and finally a traction engine that goes along the roads like a locomotive. The separator became an “agitator” or “vibrator,” and surrendered its bell-metal cog-wheels and was silent; its superb voice sank into a sullen hum and dull rattle. Barns have in large measure taken the place of the straw-shed, and the straw is mainly burned in the field. And last and most important of all, the old system of “changing works” is obsolete in the wheat land.

As we boys grew older we no longer welcomed the threshing season with unmixed delight. We now became part of the crew, and our liberty to come and go was gone. We began our service (as all Western boys will recognize) by holding sacks for the measurer. What pictures that calls up in my mind! I can see old Daddy Fairburn grinning at me out of the gray dust and swirling chaff. I can see a small youngster with a gloomy face, standing in the dirt and flying barley-beards, looking with reproachful gaze at his younger brother who, in unmolested glee, is killing rats. I can feel the barley-beards down my back, crawling and gnawing; I can hear the old man saying in a rasping voice, “Never mind, sonny; they ain’t pizen,” as if that lessened in any way my mental and physical discomfort.

On the far plain the tireless hawks wheeled and dipped through the dim splendor of the autumn afternoon. They didn’t have to hold sacks for a crusty old man in the midst of stifling dust and a deafening racket; they had only to swim on in the crisp, warm-colored air, and scream at each other in freedom. And there was little Bob, riding the straw-pole with which the “hand,” and “Doll” and “Cap” were hauling away the straw and scattering it over the stubble. *He* had nothing to do but laugh in maddening glee and roll under the straw before our sorrowful eyes.

How long those days did stretch out! The steady swing of the feeder on the platform, the steady puff of the engine and the flapping of the great belt, seemed a motion which did not think of stopping. The “setting” must be “cleaned up,” and so we keep on until the sun has gone down, till our poor stomachs cry aloud for food, till the darkness and the dust hide our boyish tears as our aching arms almost refuse to hold another sack. But the bottom bundle is up at last and the ground scraped clean; the boss puts his shoulder

under the belt; the whistle toots; the men cheer and the day’s work is done, and in a few moments, cold and silent, the machine stands solitary on the ploughed field.

But to show that the fatigue was more mental than physical, I may say that afterward we boys went out cheerfully to burn the straw which had been scattered around on the stubble. There it lay, like a lake of phenomenally rough water, everywhere in round, billowy masses with dark hollows between. We set a match in one point—on the windward side if there is one—and then, twisting up large handfuls of the long straw, run here and there like gnomes, putting the fire to the larger heaps. The flame soars up, sending a cataract of sparks and flakes into the air, and the smoke forms a vast inky roof above our heads, shutting out the stars, while the night seems suddenly to have built an impenetrable wall about us, so dark is it in contrast to the fire-light. The horizon is ringed with other burnings. Our figures in the dancing fantastic light, rising smoke and heated air, seem wild and strange, vast, deformed, unreal. And at last, as we turn our backs and start toward the house, we feel a sort of surprise to find the stars calmly shining and the landscape presenting a soft, moonlit vista, though, looking back, we see the fire still blazing, the smoke splendidly lighted.

A few years later, we were promoted and took our places on the stack as pitchers. Then in the early dawn we took our forks on our shoulders and went to help the neighbors thresh, for the system of interchanging work had not yet passed away. I have around me now, pictures which cry aloud for delineation: walks in the red dawn of October, when the landscape lay in silent ecstasy for the coming of the sun, when the frost was gleaming upon the sear grass by the road-side; of homeward walks at night when the stars were coming out, and Venus burned to her setting, and the crickets cried sleepily from the stubble. I am thinking of the going down of the sun; when my weary arms almost refuse to lift another sheaf; of the terrible dust and smoke; of the blistered hands; of the sweet, welcome cry, “turn out”; of the washing in a tin basin, and wiping, in my turn, upon a long towel, before the meal; of my ferocious appetite; of the steaming coffee and potatoes; of the stiffness in my joints and soreness in my muscles, as I rose from the table and started homeward;—all of these things thronging upon me, strangely enough, as something near and dear!

I will content myself with just a word further, as regards the social part of it. The men now are no longer the farmers’ boys of the neighborhood, come on to help; they are nomadic fellows from somewhere—nobody knows where—to help harvest and to help

All my memories of this farm are of the fiber of poetry. The silence of the snowy aisles of the forest, the whirring flight of partridges, the impudent bark of squirrels, the quavering voices of owls and coons, the music of the winds in the high trees,—all these impressions unite in my mind like parts of a woodland symphony.

A Son of the Middle Border



III. THE VOICE OF SPRING

Early in March, at the close of a warm, shining day, just as the sun is setting in a red, cloudless glory, down from a low hill-top and thrilling through the misty, wavering atmosphere, rolls the joyous *boom, boom, boom* of the prairie cock, the first note that opens the vernal symphony. “Hurrah!” shouts every boy who hears it, “spring is coming!” There is no sweeter sound in the ears of the prairie-born man than the splendid morning chorus of these noble birds, for it is distinctively a sign that the winter is broken at last: and it brings with it a fund of sunny and fresh associations which thrill the heart with a vague but massive joy of living.

At such moments as this sunset, when the bell-like voice of the prairie cock tolls the departing of King Frost, I am almost inclined to say that it is worth while to live through one of those long, unbroken Western winters, just for the exquisite delight one feels when the change comes; and the song of the prairie chickens is inseparably bound up with the glory of awakening spring. All day the snow has been melting and running in streams of coolest water; running with soft, far-away tinkle under the ice and through the grass by the roadside. Bare spots appear in the ploughed land on the knolls, and there the prairie cock is strutting to and fro. Ponds are forming in every hollow on the prairie, and we boys are correspondingly elate, for the skating season is about beginning with us, a fact that engrosses all our attention.

There was but little skating on the prairie during the winter, as the ponds were either frozen up rough or were covered with snow; so we waited with some impatience the time when the fun should commence, which was usually the last of February or the first of March. School continued till about the middle of March ordinarily, and therefore we brought our skates every day with us as soon as there was any possible chance of getting upon a strip of ice as big as a blanket.

For weeks we had been playing a sort of crude baseball, using a ball of solid rubber. I am constrained to stop and remark upon the intensity of the partisanship manifested in the game, as we played it. Brothers, when upon different sides, “jawed” and even fought one another, in their zeal to whip opponents. Disputes were rife as to whether this ball was caught on the first or second bound, or whether a man was “crossed out” or not, and the game seldom went through an hour without “talk.”

thresh. They are rough, swearing, drinking fellows, with whom the farmer has as little to do as possible. In Dakota, the threshers even carry a tent and a cook, and feed and lodge the hands whom they take with them. In this way, the farmer hardly comes in contact with the men, and all of the old-time bustle and neighborliness is gone.

There are picturesque phases to the modern methods, with its traction engines, the sleeping-tent and the cooking-car, but the spirit which made the old-time threshing a festival, the circumstances which made of it a delightful meeting together of neighbors, are, in many places, a memory. The growth of the farms in area, the further increase of machinery, the change in products— all are working to render the farmer more independent of outside help, but at the same time, separating him from the fellowship of his neighbors.

Therefore, it is that the middle-aged man of to-day, or the man of thirty, looks back with peculiar tenderness to the days of “bees” and of “harvest dances”; to the old-time “thrashin’ season,” when the cheer and gladness of a neighborly meeting sweetened, in a measure, the bitterness of farm-life, and the sound of the violin sent tired feet tripping with most wonderful airiness around the warm and mellow-lighted kitchen; and when the boys walked home with the girls, in the crisp, starlit air. O, those days and nights! Wagnerian symphonies can never sound as musical as David McTurg’s playing; nor state balls seem so enjoyable as the swirl of forms in the “Fireman’s Dance” and “Honest John.”

As for myself, I am overwhelmed by the majesty, the
immensity, the infinite charm of the life that goes
on around me.

"Provincialism," Crumbling Idols



But at the first suspicion of skating, ball was forgotten, and everyone who had a pair of runners of any kind, strapped them on. We did not have such skates as youngsters have now. Ours were of all sorts and eras, from Charley Svend, with old, long, low Norway “scooters,” to Burton Knapp, who had an eight-dollar pair, resplendent in brass, with beautiful curving toes! Many of us had none at all, and only by the most piteous entreaties could we persuade our elder brothers to “let us take ’em just for a little minute.”

To this day I remember with what ecstasy, intermixed with ignoble rage, I sprawled around on the tiny pond below the school-house, my skate-straps continually getting loose and tripping me up, and my poor ankles bending inward to the extent of causing the wood of the skate to touch the ice, bringing disaster. I know I shall have sympathizers when I speak of the painful fact that the edge of the “counters” to our hard, pitiless boots gnawed into our ankles in such wise as to produce a sore which embittered our poor existence during the skating season. We suffered the more because there were Burton and “the boy from New York” skimming around like swallows, standing erect, and “rolling” from one foot to the other in a manner calculated to drive us mad.

Ah! did we not improve those shining hours? Out early in the crisp, spring air, when the trees and the grass hung thick with frost, and the sun, yellow and dazzling, transformed our world into fairyland, a land of gold and silver, gleaming and pure, canopied with a cloudless sky, all flushed with crimson. Anon the jay or the snow-bird dashing amid the glorified maple trees, sent down showers of gold and silver dust, and the ice, creaking and booming, lay like burnished steel, while the air was so clear and still that the skaters called to each other a mile away.

We had few lakes or rivers, and our ponds were only small and temporary. However, as the spring came on, the snow melted in the wide, flat fields, moved slowly down the hollows until it reached a huge barricade unmelted, stretching hard and thick along some fence or hedge, and was there held fast; and lo! as in the tale by Hawthorne, a lake rippled where was yesterday solid land—upon the very ground where we had ploughed or husked corn, now lay a frozen lake, on which we skated in highest glee.

During the last of February and the first of March, we were skating at every opportunity. Early in the morning, at recess, at noon and at night; in bands, girls and boys, we roved up and down the “swales” or enjoyed “gool” and “pom, pom, pull-away,”—games which could be played on the snow or the ice as the case demanded. “*Pom,*

pom, pull-away!” O, the phrase hath magic in it! Around it are clustered many boyish sports and many emotions; many nights on the ponds, many intermissions at lyceum and school meetings.

“Pom, Pom, Pull-Away”

Out on the snow the boys are springing,
Shouting blithely at their play;
Through the night their voices ringing,
Sound the cry “*Pom, pull-away!*”
Up the sky the round moon stealing,
Trails a robe of shimmering white;
Overhead, the Great Bear wheeling
Round the pole-star’s steady light.

The air with frost is keen and stinging,
Spite of cap and muffler gay;
Big boys whistle, girls are singing—
Loud rings out, “*Pom, pull-away!*”
O, the phrase has magic in it,
Sounding through the moon-lit air!
And in about a half-a-minute
I am part and parcel there.

’Cross the pond I once more scurry
Through the thickest of the fray,
Sleeve ripped off by Andy Murray—
“Let her rip—*Pom, pull-away!*”
Mother ’ll mend it in the morning
(Dear old patient, smiling face!);
One more darn my sleeve adorning—
“*Whoop her up!*”—is no disgrace.

These prairies were intersected by beautiful streams, belted in splendid groves of oaks and maples and basswood trees. The prairies were generally level, with long swells like a quiet sea, but in the neighborhood of streams they grew more varied and wooded.

Foreword, Prairie Songs



Moonbeams on the snow-crust splinter,
Air that stirs the blood like wine—
What cared we for cold of winter?
What for maidens' soft eyes' shine?
Give us but a score of skaters
And the cry, "*Pom, pull-away.*"
We were always girl-beraters—
Forgot them wholly, sooth to say!

O, voices through the night air ringing!
O, thoughtless, happy, boist'rous play!
O, silver clouds the keen wind winging;
And the cry, "*Pom, pull-away!*"
I pause and dream with keenest longing
For that star-lit magic night,
For my noisy playmates thronging,
And the slow moon's trailing light.

It was but seldom that the fields or meadows possessed these ponds as large as lakes, for their continuance depended upon the time it would take the water to mine through the frost in the ground, or break the dam of hard snow and go rushing into the next field with such power that no other barricade could hold it. Usually when the ponds came, the sun was high and warm and the ice thin; and when the water began to ebb, it produced many beautiful results. It left upon the clover of the meadows and the corn-stalks of the fields strange formations, between the ground and the ice at the top; fabrics of all shapes, which our imaginations turned into towns and crowds of animals and men. Tiny cathedrals with turrets and spires would be disclosed as we broke the ice and peered under; horsemen with spears, arches, labyrinths of crystal pillars and tree-trunks, through which the water gurgled and tinkled with the most entrancing music.

I have lain long with ear pressed to the ice, listening to the faint fairy-like melodies rung as upon tiny bells, mingled with fainter breathing sounds, and the plashing of infinitesimal waterfalls, and a rhythmic far-away lapping as the wavelets ebbed and flowed.

Then there were the ice-plates or air-plates under the pellucid palettes, holding all colors of a rainbow. As the dam broke and let the water away, it left crystal terraces, exposing this fairy world to our inquisitive eyes; and when the sun was at the right angle, and lighted up the arches, pillars, aisles and transepts, the sight was beautiful beyond words.

One of our inventions—the whirligig, which sprung during the winter from the lack of hills to coast upon and ice to skate over—consisted of a long pole hung on the top of a short upright post, set in the midst of a small pond of ice. To the longer end of the pole was attached a sled by ropes as long as the size of the pond admitted. Power was applied to the short end of the pole by a boy or boys walking in steps cut in the ice, and pushing. It will be seen that the most frightful speed could be almost instantly attained. The sled was like a stone in a sling, and there was a point where it rose in the air with a swing like that of a swallow, to touch the ice only at intervals. The dangerous machine was given up when the skating really began; besides, the spring ice would not bear the strain of the sweep as it revolved upon the upright post.

What with the skating and the school exhibition on the last day, the ending week of February and first half of March were as busy as midwinter had been slow. Already we began to feel the spring-time awakening.

As soon as the momentous last day of school was reached, our several fathers introduced us to the wood-piles where the hired man had been at work for a week or two; but we still found time in the early morning to slip out on the meadow, while the chickens were calling, and before the sun had weakened the ice. The chorus of the prairie hens increased day by day, and water was everywhere. Travel was well-nigh impossible, for the frost going out left the roads bottomless. There was nothing to do but to split wood, dig trenches to carry off the water, and hide eggs for Easter.

There was always a charm about this part of the year, despite all its discomfort. The chip-pile was a sort of oasis in the general slush and mud, and on this mound, where the sun seemed to shine the warmest, we lived during the interval between school and seeding. Thus enthroned, we watched the snow disappear from the plowed ground, then draw sullenly off the fields of russet grass, and take a final stand at the fence corners. We watched the ducks, as they came straggling back from their winter in the summer seas, alighting in the corn-fields to find food, but they were so wary that we seldom shot them.

Around them were bare
trees, with buds just
beginning to swell. The
grass was green only in
the sunny nooks . . .

Boy Life on the Prairie



Moreover, we were near the kitchen, and could instantly tell whether mother was making a new batch of cookies or not. The hired man told long yarns while we chopped, the chickens of the farmyard crowed and cackled and scratched around us, and the seed-time came on swiftly. On the whole, the chip-pile is a sunny place in my memory, and seems the properest of all places to sit and describe the coming of spring and retreat of winter.

One of our diversions which I have mentioned was the hiding of eggs for Easter. There was no special reason for it that I can remember, and yet as a custom it was quite common among the boys, especially those who came from New York or had German parentage. The ostensible purpose was to lay up a supply of eggs for Easter consumption; but as they were always exceedingly abundant at that season of the year—almost worthless, in fact—the motive was something else. Perhaps it was a relic of some Old World superstition. It was our custom, anyhow, to hide two or three eggs a day during the three or four weeks preceding Easter. Sometimes we dug holes in the haystack to store them in; or, mindful of the old adage, we put part in one place and part in another. Then we would meet the other boys, compare notes as to numbers, and plan for a great day on Easter.

As the festival drew near, our anxiety increased, for the understanding was that if father found our hiding-place he could confiscate the store. And so, day after day, to our dread, he would go poking about, all around the very spot where they were hidden; and sometimes he got part of them, but as a rule we escaped with several dozen, and celebrated Easter morning by having eggs served in two or three ways, our mothers entering into our sport to that extent. But it was the dinner which had a special flavor, for if the day were pleasant we met other boys of the neighborhood, and carried out a planned excursion to some wood near by.

There in the warm spring sun, beside a brook to furnish water, we cooked our eggs *ourselves*, boiling some and roasting others, making a meal of them, together with bread and butter, which we brought in tin pails. Around us were the bare trees, their buds just beginning to swell; the grass was peeping up here and there in warm and sunny nooks, and the sky was full of soft clouds; our only guests the squirrels and blue-jays. There was no conscious purpose in this feast so far as we were concerned; no ethical consideration attaching; but deep down in the unconscious nature we had gone back to the worship of *Eastre*, the Anglo-Saxon divinity of spring. It was our celebration of the escape from the

bonds of winter, our greeting to the “maiden of might,” and it was complete if there were warmth enough to allow us to take off our boots and feel the soil with our feet. Back to the wild, back to the freedom of the savage, we tended irresistibly; and the egg was the symbol of spring.

To this day I can taste the peculiar flavor of those roasted eggs (which was another return to barbarism—in cooking) and feel the ashes on my tongue; I can smell the pungent smoke of the grass with which we started the fire, and see the hawk’s quick stare as he swept overhead. Sometimes a “chub” or “shiner” from the brook added to the flavor of the meal, but eggs were the order of the day; and when we went back to civilization, the nineteenth century, and bondage, at night, our offerings to *Eastre* had been successful. Simple as this custom was, it helped to sweeten life. O! boyhood, how little it takes to glorify a day! How little to gild a cloud!

And afterward came the day when the windows of the house were thrown open, the stove moved out into the summer-kitchen and the banking withdrawn from the front door—a wonderfully moving time. The sun, warm and yellow, now lies powerfully upon the land, and the sullen drifts alone remain of all the earth’s former burden of snow. The colts and young cattle frolic about the muddy barnyard; the hens, singing their weird harsh-throated spring-time song, are pecking about the kitchen door, or burrowing in the dry chip-pile and winter ash-heap. The sky, so blue and soft, is filled with beautiful fleecy clouds straying by, stately as great ships; not the dull gray, diffused clouds of winter, but the white and brown masses that make the heart leap with suggestions of summer flowers, full-leaved trees, rain-showers, and the songs of birds.

Then It’s Spring

When the hens begin a-squawk’n’
And a-rollin’ in th’ dust,
When the roosters take t’ talk’n’
And a-crow’n’ fit t’ bust,
When th’ crows are caw’n’ n’ flock’n’
An’ the chickuns boom an’ sing—
Then it’s spring.

The cabin faced a level plain with no tree in sight. A mile away to the west stood a low stone house and immediately in front of us opened a half-section of unfenced sod.

A Son of the Middle Border



When th' roads is jest one mud-hole,
And th' worter, trickl'n' round,
Makes the barn-yard like a puddle,
An' it sof'ens up th' ground
Till y're ankle-deep in mortar,
Sayin' words y' had n't orter;
When the jay-birds swear 'n' sing—
Then it's spring.

In such days, as we boys lay out on the warm side of the hay-stack or woodpile, an inexpressible joy of living took possession of us. Like the fowls and the young animals, we laughed and ran; or sat silent, listening to the thrilling great song of the spring, or looking upon the fields beginning to be brown as the frost disappeared. Such moments are indescribable, full of emotional expansion.

Those days were filled with preparations for work upon the land. Every farmer was busy getting out his seeders, his drags and cultivators; scouring up his plows, and fanning over his seed-wheat and doing other things necessary for the seeding. The music of the prairie chickens has now become a vast symphony impossible to transcribe. Thousands of throats pour forth the “boom, boom, boom—cutta, cutta wah whoop—boom, boom—wha-oo! ye-ah! ye-ah! whoop.” Resonant from every knoll, near and far; filling the mellow dawn with cheer, and ringing the horizon round with sounds: a song that with the glory of the opening day is sublime for its wealth of suggestions and its power of prophecy. On such mornings we drive our team afield, the sun just rising, the sky clear, the west wind soft and warm.

The ducks and geese are in full flight, returning to the north; stopping in the fields and around the ponds only to spend the night and rest. Far in the spacious deeps of the sky the tireless crane soars and swings again, giving out his majestic imperial note as if to send down a greeting to the toiler man and announce the coming of the queen of the seasons. As I think of him I am moved to apostrophize him in the way of the “old school”:

To the Herald Crane

“Ha!” Say'st thou so, bold sailor in
The sunlit deeps of sky?
Dost thou so soon the seed-time tell
In thy imperial cry,
As circling in yon shoreless sea.
Unseen thou 'rt drifting by?

I cannot trace in the noon-day glare
Thy regal flight, O crane!
From the fiery might of the leaping light
Mine eye recoils in pain;
But on mine ear thine echoing cry
Falls like a bugle strain.

The mellow soil glows beneath my feet
Where lies the buried grain;
The warm light floods the length and breadth
Of the vast, dim, shimmering plain,
Throbbing with heat, and the nameless thrill
Of the birth-time's restless pain.

On weary wings plebeian geese
Push on their arrowy line
Straight into the north; or snowy brant
In streaming sun-light gloom and shine:
But thou, O crane! save for thy sovereign cry,
At thy majestic height,
On proud extended wings sweep'st on
In lonely easeful flight.

It is only to the superficial observer that this country seems colorless and dull; to the veritist it is full of burning interest, greatest possibilities.

"Provincialism," Crumbling Idols



Then cry, thou martial-throated herald!
Cry to the sun, and sweep
And swing along thy mateless tireless course,
Above the clouds that sleep
Afloat on lazy air! Cry on, send down
Thy trumpet note—it seems
The voice of hope and dauntless will,
And breaks the spell of dreams!

There was a distinct and abundant pleasure in the work of seeding. The soil, each day getting warmer and mellower; the gophers coming out of their winter quarters; the ducks, geese, and other migrating birds flying by overhead; the coming of the robins, blue-birds, and stupendous flocks of the ground-birds not yet beginning to pair—all of these things we kept watch upon as we trudged behind the huge harrows (drawn by three horses driven abreast), or the seeder gaudy with paint.

Day after day the grass in the fence corners got a little greener, the willows in the hedge put forth small fuzzy tails, and always the brown earth grew richer. At night, vast fires shone red and fierce in the far-off plain to the north, or in the heavy meadow-lands nearer by; and by day the smoke from these fires hung wavering and blue over the whole landscape, and under the warm sun of the mid-day glimmered and quivered, so that the solid plain was made as light and airy as a wind-shaken curtain.

Then we had to clear away the cornstalks from the ground, in order to sow the land for oats or barley; and the burning of these wind-rows added to the misty atmosphere, so that on the very ground where we had husked corn the fall before, and upon which the spring freshets had given us a skating pond, we now paddled about on our bare feet, setting fire to the wind-rows of broken-down corn-hills. What a pleasure to feel the soft, moist earth with our own toes! to race after the gophers starting out fresh and chipper from their long sleep! Never in coming years shall I feel the like or do the like again.

Seeding was by no means all fun. On the contrary, there was sufficient discomfort. The work was hard, and often very disagreeable; for, having a large area to sow, it was necessary to get upon the ground as soon as the frost was out to sufficient depth that the seed might be covered. This meant getting out into the field with the sun, and a forced march until

night, walking twenty or thirty miles in the mud every day, dragging huge boots loaded down with soil. Moreover, it was a season of the year when we were not hardened to the task of walking, and the sinking of our heels into the soft ground strained the lower tendons of the leg till every step was agony.

Sixteen acres a day was the task of the man with the seeder, which sowed and covered a strip seven feet wide; and an equal area for the drag if it “lapped half,” as was necessary on the new ground, or thirty acres if the full width (nine feet) was the rule. The later machines for the seed-time are immensely more effective, the broad-cast seeder now in use in Dakota sowing thirty feet in breadth, and the three-horse drag cutting twenty-seven feet; but in the days of which I write we had to be early on the ground in the spring, had to put in full days and hard days, in order to get the grain sown in proper season.

The boy of the household always began his apprenticeship in seeding by one of the harrows, which were called “drags.” At night he turned the fanning-mill while the wheat was being cleaned up; in the early dawn he had cows to milk, or horses to curry and harness, before eating his breakfast; and then while the sun was wearily climbing above the horizon, and while the air was yet frosty, the boy had to drive his team afield—all of which is pleasanter to contemplate than to experience.

Still, as he listened to the vast chorus of the chickens, saw the fresh sweet sky, let the eye sweep round the illimitable reach of the plain, noticed his playmates in the neighboring fields going to work, and heard their merry songs and shouts through the marvelously clear air, he was able, even then, to forget his stiff joints and his tender and tired feet.

Sundays now attained a new value, for as we worked hard all the week the day of rest and recreation struck fetters off indeed. It allowed the boys of the neighborhood to meet for games of some sort; since while some of the people attended church, most of them seized the opportunity for making an all-day visit to their relatives or neighbors: a beautiful custom with one evil attached—the extra work which it placed on the hostess. As she saw the huge lumber-wagon drive into the yard about eleven o’clock with “Sam’s folks,” it is hard to say whether joy or sorrow predominated in her long-suffering soul.

As for the boys, I much regret to say that the young savages spent a large part of their time in snaring innocent little gophers with a string, or drowning them out with water poured into their burrows; and I can only add in extenuation that the

There were mornings when
the glittering purple and
orange domes of the oaks
and maples swam in the mist
dreamfully, so beautiful the
eyes lingered upon them
wistfully.

A Spoil of Office



Western corn-raiser finds the gopher his chief pest, and encourages the boys in their diabolical business.

I may say, also, that the older boys attended church with a regularity highly to be commended, were it not for the fact that they went home with the girls afterward, and could not for the life of them remember a word the preacher said. It was an open secret with the youngsters that the big boys were frauds.

And so, work and play—six days’ work and one day’s play—occupied the spring months. After wheat was sown the corn was to be planted, and after the corn was planted fences were to build, and so on; work was never done. And the fields grew green with that mighty mystery the springing grain; the poplar trees put forth their leaves first, then the oak leaves grew to the size of a squirrel’s ear as the corn was planted; the birds paired off and nested; the cattle went forth on the rich and sunny prairies, where the early flowers began to bloom; like the peerless overture to “Lohengrin,” the morning symphony of the prairie chickens died away to a single note, and genial spring was merged in sultry summer.

IV. BETWEEN HAY AN’ GRASS

The finishing up of the seeding was in cross-dragging, and by that time the soil was dry and mellow, throbbing with heat and life, and ready to embrace the corn, a much more tender and hesitating germ than the hardy cereals, wheat, oats and barley. The corn-ground was sometimes plowed in the spring, but more often in the fall; and all that remained in preparation was to cultivate it with the seeder-teeth and harrow it with the great drags till it was as smooth and mellow as a garden.

By this time the earliest sown wheat was flinging a beautiful green shade over the other fields, and the verdant grass came back to clothe the bare and blackened sod; the larks had returned, the geese and ducks had all passed over to the lakes in the farther north; only the solitary crane still wheeled slowly by in his majestic flight—hardly a day passing but his sonorous note fell from the fathomless depths of the dazzling sky—and the morning symphony of the prairie hens began to die away. The popple groves were deliciously green, their round leaves trembling in the breeze; the oak began to take on a pinkish and brownish tinge, as the tender leaves unfolded toward the point of being as large as a squirrel’s ear. At this period it was time to begin planting corn.

This was, in ordinary years, about the third or fifth of May; and one of the pleasantest experiences of the year. The ground, a deep rich loam, unmixed with rocks or gravel, lay out in broad acres, having been harrowed until it was as fine and soft as a flower-bed. Then after it had been marked one way by a contrivance resembling a four-runnered sleigh, which left the field crossed with deep lines four feet apart, it was ready for planting. The custom of the best farmers was to wait and mark it the other way just ahead of the planters, in order that the grain should fall in the moist earth.

In those days the hand-planting had not given way to that of the machine, and corn-planting was more of an event. We, smallest boys, had been helping to make garden. We had raked up the yard, clipped vines, set onions and radishes till we were tired, but when the call came to plant corn we went at it with considerable animation, though it must be said that our enthusiasm was, as a rule, short-lived. Fields for it then ranged from ten to sixty acres, though wheat was still the prevailing crop; and to drop and cover fifty acres of corn was a “considable of a job ’n them days.”

Human life does not move with the regularity of a clock. In living there are gaps and silences when the soul stands still in its flight through abysses—and there come times of trial and times of struggle when we grow old without knowing it.

"A Branch Road," Main-Travelled Roads



So, early on a fine May morning we might have been seen starting for the field in hilarious mood; the boss, the hired man, a couple of neighbors' sons—stalwart young fellows who are “changing works,” that is, helping us, with the understanding that we are to help them. Sometimes the girls, sisters of the men or daughters to the boss, go along to help. The hand drives the marker, the girls and the smallest boy drop the corn, and the boss and the others with light, sharp flashing hoes follow to “cover.” The marker starts over the field, crossing the old marks and producing checks or squares; and at the intersections thereof the seed is dropped and covered. The field is brown, rich, and level, half-mile bouts being the usual length; the air is still, and we can hear the merry voices of other similar parties in the neighboring fields. The young fellows choose their “droppers” among the girls, and the work begins right briskly.

Dropping corn is an art. I think at this distance I may say that I was an artist thereat, being able to drop for two coverers at once, which was phenomenal work. Lest the reader may not be correctly informed as to the method, I will explain a little in detail. First, you must pull off your boots or you will miss the delicious feeling of the warm moist earth, as the tender sole sinks to the instep, burrowing like some wild thing but lately returned to its native element. Next, you get one of your mother's old faded calico aprons to tie around your waist (Nellie will tie it for you); then tie a huge knot in the slack of it and you have a pouch resembling that in which the carpenter carries his nails; fill this with a couple of quarts of corn—take your place—go!

Now you must drop “three and four” kernels—no more and no less—in each intersection of the grooves. The sharp eyes of those who are following will detect every mistake (though, if you are a girl, “Len” will say nothing, but cover the one poor little kernel as quickly as possible before the vigilant eyes of the boss see it). But if you are skilled you get the swing of it, and every time you plant your left foot in a groove you drop three grains, fearing not the swift steady stroke of the hoe behind; but the soil is so mellow and the hoe so light and keen that one clip is all that the skillful coverer gives to each hill, and he presses you hard. The gait is a rapid walk, and the dull ring of the hoe at your naked heels is like the tick of a clock for speed and regularity. But being skilled and generous you walk between the girls and help them along by dropping an occasional hill on their rows.

Nevertheless, it is hard work. Your neck aches and your back aches, and by the time you have gone eighty rods and arrive at the fence, you are only too glad to throw back your head and look at the sky. You take plenty of time to fill your pouch. As the forenoon wears away, the sun get incredibly warm; and as the boss leans on his hoe and looks lovingly at the wide level field getting greener each hour, he says, with a voice full of a sort of tender awe, “I jest believe I c’n *hear that wheat grow!*”

We went to dinner in those days with an appetite born of a nearness to the earth. It was a merry meal, though the unusual work was wearisome to the girls, and not infrequently they flatly rebelled and took several hours of “nooning.” Those early days of planting corn have a distinct and mellow charm for me now as they did then. There were superb dawns, and warm, sensuous, slumbrous noons; there were gorgeously colored, indescribable sunsets flaming across the sea of tender springing wheat, when a rising mist was in the air, and the diminishing notes of the prairie chickens still rang in quavering intermittent music through the red haze, joining with the swelling chorus of the frogs who took up and carried forward the theme as the other voices died slowly away.

O, days unspeakable! O, simple, homely tasks! How shall the careworn man tell the glory, the majesty of those nights and days as they filled the boy's heart with a pleasure so deep as almost to be pain. O, to bury my feet again in that moist, warm earth; to lie on the mellow ground in the sun; to walk across the fields and hear the steady click of the hoe at my heel, and the laugh of the girls working beside!

But, no! my capacity for such simple life has gone. It is a delusion, the mere gilding of a hard task, a halo around a dull and laborious life by the passage of time. Ah, well! there is no harm done in looking back wistfully at this distance—it is safe enough. It is a phase of life passed away. The “check-row automatic corn-planter and coverer” has taken the place of the girls and boys with aprons and hoes. With a long knotted cable and a machine, one man now drives a team into the field and plants and covers eighteen acres a day. Girls no longer have any part in this truly beautiful work of putting the corn in the earth, and the boy is required only to stick pumpkin-seeds (which almost breaks his back now as it did of old). When they get a machine to plant pumpkin-seeds, improvement in the direction of corn-planting can go no further. The steady *click, click*, of the machine will be the only voice in the wide and sunny field.

There, on a low mound in the midst of the prairie, in the shadow of the house we had built, beneath the slender trees we had planted, we were bidding farewell to one cycle of emigration and entering upon another.

A Son of the Middle Border



The spring's work now done, there came a little breathing spell for men and teams, and surely they needed it. The horses, so shining and plump a few weeks ago, now looked gaunt and worn. The men also felt a vast relief at the end of the planting, for all through April from early morning till dark they had hurried to and fro across the field, tramp, tramp, like madmen chasing some charm invisible to the onlooker. Wheat-sowing was always a hard season.

The corn planted, we, boys, had a new and (I am sorry to say) a pleasant work to perform, namely, to snare and shoot the gophers from the corn-fields. The Western reader needs no further information concerning this work, but to those living in Eastern cities explanation is quite necessary. There are, in the prairie states of the West, two sorts of ground squirrel, popularly known as "the striped gopher" and "the gray gopher." The striped gopher is a differentiation of the chip-munk of the woods, and the gray gopher is simply the gray squirrel in a new habitat. I may chronicle here an interesting fact: that the survival of the fittest has brought about a beautiful adaptation to environment in both cases. The striped gopher is so delicately marked and colored that he is well nigh invisible when in the short yellow and green grass of the upland. On the other hand, the gray gopher keeps in the neighborhood of spots of ground producing long tufts of gray and weather-beaten grass, places where the last year's growth still remains, the color harmonizing with his own yellow-gray coat, and aiding him in his efforts to escape the hawk and the coyote.

These little creatures, like the wild chicken, follow a certain stage of civilization, and absolutely swarm in the sod adjoining a field. They grew to be a great pest, for they developed the most remarkable intellectual cleverness in finding and digging up the corn after being dropped and covered in the manner just described. In some strange manner the roguish little fellows found out that wherever there were two deep marks crossing, and a man's footmark imprinted on a little mound of dirt, therein were to be found most delectable bits of food, and they took advantage of their knowledge.

It was not uncommon to find a long row of newly-planted corn dug up in this manner, with the most unerring precision. This was clearly a case of development, for the gophers on the wild prairie were not by large odds so shrewd as those scions of a stock whose five or six generations had dwelt within the neighborhood of man. Inherited aptitude, evidently united to native and individual intelligence. However this may be, the fact remains that it was "dead gophers or no corn," and with gun and poison we waged remorseless war upon them on work-days, and with snares we compassed their destruction on Sundays.

I will not stop to dissertate on the strange delight boys have in causing suffering to men and animals alike, but will pass to another and pleasanter consideration. Although possessed with more or less of the savage delight, we were, I think, like the angler or hunter, more pleased with the effect of the sun, the wind and the earth upon us, with the freedom from labor, than with killing the little creatures. I remember but with sorrow the occasional gopher caught by the sinewy neck in my noose, but all that surround the act are unmixed delights. There was the congregation of the boys of the near neighborhood to enjoy the bracing morning; the tender, springing grass; the far-away, faint changing purple of the wood; the shimmer of the swelling prairie, leaping toward the flaming sun—all the inexpressible glow and pulse and blooming desire of the spring day come around me as I write of that apparently barbarous and otherwise trivial matter.

It is only another exemplification of Mr. Howells' position, so well voiced, too, by Emerson and Whitman. Go the whole earth round, we surely come back to find the vulgar and common things nearest us, sweetest and most significant of all.

Being something of a psychologist, I am often profoundly amused at the revelations which come to me in writing reminiscences of this nature. These *genre* pictures of boy-life in the West are intrinsically of no moment; their interest will be mainly due to the observer and his angle of vision; to one who (like myself) is a product of these scenes and incidents, a word or sentence concerning a common experience will assume great value, while at the same time, those reared among a totally different set of vulgar incidents will be amused merely. To return to our snare:

With a long piece of stout twine—saved for several months from grocery packages—we sally forth on a Sunday morning in May, two or three neighbors' boys going along to help out the fun. If there is Sunday-school, we will attend that in the afternoon, but the forenoon is to be taken up in basking on the prairie. The gophers are whistling here and there, and dashing about; a hawk dips and wheels in the slumbrous, shimmering air; plover and snipe lend voice to the scene, the plover incessantly rising and settling on a fence-post or mound, with its peculiar wailing, quavering *pee-weet*; while the twitter of innumerable ground-sparrows passing overhead, and the sweet and thrilling note of the meadow-lark, add an inexpressible charm to the morning air.

Snaring gophers is like fishing, an excuse for enjoying nature; but having driven a gopher into his burrow, you turn from the landscape hastily to put your slip-knot in the

Snow and sleet fell at intervals, rattling in among the sear stalks with a dreary sound.

Boy Life on the Prairie



mouth of the smooth hole and retire to the end of the taut string to wait till he pops his head through the noose, which he will do—possibly. It is the habit of these little fellows to come suddenly to the top of their burrow, and then cautiously lift head until they can eye you. You must be keen-eyed if you note the little rogue, for he is not only just the color of the surrounding grass, but he is a rare ventriloquist. After sitting a couple of minutes and seeing nothing, you hear a low, sweet trill as of a sleepy bird. You can not place it. It may be in the air, it may be to the left or the right; you can not tell. But if you be skilled, you know that the crafty rascal has come out at some other burrow, and that he is laughing at you, “*pr-rr-ee-ee!*”

You turn your head—“*cheep!*” A slight motion to your left apprises you where he has gone down. You adjust your snare there, and again sit patiently and as still as stone four, five minutes, and then you hear that sly, sleepy trill. It sounds back of you at first, then in front, and finally turning your head slowly, you see a bright eye gleaming upon you from the burrow where you had your snare set in the first place.

At this you laugh, and pulling in your snare out of respect for his cunning and his marvelous ventriloquistic powers, lay out full length on the warm, bright green sod. You listen to the multitudinous, softened sounds of the prairie; you hear the drowsy laugh of your companions, see the girls picking flowers on the sunny slopes; and in a sort of drowsy, sensuous content, gaze at the clouds and dream and dream, without other desire than to be left in peace in the spring sunshine. The wind wanders by in gentle gusts, but there is no grass to wave, no trees to rustle; an infinite peace broods on the whole wide prairie.

One feels at such moments like the angler who lays his rod among the ferns and watches the soaring heron, high in air; listens to the ripple of the stream, its beating, pulsing, ringing chimes, putting one into perfect content and peace. In such times the man forgets his wants and desires, and actually goes back to the prehistoric state, when desires were simple and few and easily allayed. Lying thus, the bright-eyed little trickster ventures up to his hunter’s feet, and rustles in the short grass at his very ear. No matter, they are brothers now!

In those early days there were vast tracts of land lying waste, over which the cattle and horses during the summer roamed as wild things. As soon as the grass began to spring from the blackened sod the cattle were turned out to forage for their living, and soon

all those of the neighborhood aggregated into large droves feeding miles away from home. Each night, therefore, till late in the fall, it was our duty—and a pleasant one ordinarily—to mount our horses and “cut” the cows out of the drove and bring them home. This we always did on horseback, of course; and in consequence each boy grew to ride like a Sioux. The most of us began to ride in this fashion when seven or eight years of age, absolutely growing up in the saddle; and a little later, when the cattle were herded, we spent many days on the wild lands. The prairies of northern Iowa were then very beautiful. They were richly clothed with verdure: on the uplands a short light-green grass intermixed with various “weeds,” the lowlands showing a thick tall growth of various kinds of grasses and willows. Along the streams a few miles apart there were lines of luxuriant timber, oak, ash, maple, elm and basswood. The streams were pure and cold, but had few fish. I have never seen anything in the shape of meadow so luxuriant and beautiful as those natural meadows in June. The flash and the ripple and glimmer, the myriad voices of the ecstatic little bobolinks, joined with the chirp and whistle of the red-wings swaying on the weeds or the willows, the larks piping from grassy bogs, and swift-flying snipe and plover adding their shrill voices as they rose from and sank into the flowery, green depths of the grass!

Nor was the upland less interesting, as we roamed far and wide over it on our horses. In the spring the sight of the huge antlers lying in countless numbers white and bare on the sod told of the millions of elk and deer that had once fed in these green savannas. The gray hermit, the badger, made his den in the sunny slopes of the long swells, as did also the fox and swift coyote; and many a mad race we made after this swift and tireless “spectre of the plains”—all to no purpose, save to bring out the speed of our horses and break the monotony of the day’s herding the cattle.

Scattered over these uplands were groves, or, more exactly, clumps of popple trees, called “tow-heads,” for some occult reason; they were commonly round and ordinarily from a hundred to four hundred feet in diameter, though in some cases they were many acres in extent. Then there were seas of hazel thickets, intermixed with lagoons of blue-joint grass, that beautiful and stately product of the richest soil. Over these uplands, through these lakes of hazel and round these islands of popple, we boys on fleet horses careered—chasing the rabbit, hunting the cows, or racing the drove of half-wild horses. In summer we verily lived on the prairie and on horseback.

There was immensity in the dome of the unbroken, seamless,
gray threatening sky. There was majesty in the dim plain,
across which the morning light slowly fell.

A Spoil of Office



As it cost nothing, or next to nothing, to keep horses, every farmer had from five to twenty colts ranging from one to four years old. In the spring these longhaired half-wild creatures were turned loose, or were tempted away by the grass of the swales, from the straw-piles in whose lee they had burrowed during the winter; and as soon as the warmth and plenty of the spring had filled them with new life they doffed their shaggy coats and lifted head to the breeze in glorious freedom. Most of them had never had a man's hand on them, but even those, once tamed, mingled with the wild ones so indiscriminately that only by the collar marks, or other ineffaceable badge of servitude, could they be distinguished from the rest.

It was curious, it was glorious! to see how the old wild instinct broke out in these halterless herds! In a few days, after many battles, individual and otherwise, the horses of all the region united into one drove, and a leader, the swiftest and most tireless of them all appeared from the ranks and led in the splendid evolutions of the troupe. I remember the first time I ever saw them thus on the wing. It was in the sixties, and was my first morning on the genuine prairie. The day before we had traveled from another county, fifty miles to the east, and near the Mississippi, arriving at our new home late at night. Directly in front of our little frame-house, there was a vacant unfenced half-section of land; the other farms surrounding it were fenced, for the "herd law" had not yet passed. Far to the north and west the wild prairie stretched boundlessly.

As we stood the next morning looking at the vast level sweep of the russet plain, we heard a distant roar and trample, and saw a cloud of dust rising along a road leading north, as if a railway train were rushing southward towards us, and a moment later out on the smooth sod burst a platoon of half-wild horses led by a superb cream mare. Ah! how they exulted! How they laughed in the cool autumn air! as they wheeled in crescent form, charged in echelon, thundered abreast or raced like speeders on the course. Under their long and tangled manes gleamed their eyes, blazing with the wild light of exultation. They shook their heads; neighed like bugles, snorting defiance; their long tails and manes floated like banners.

As we cheered at this inspiriting sight, the cause of such sudden debauch was made plain. For a man mounted on a fleet little cream (the mate of the leader), was riding at a slashing run between us and the drove, endeavoring to head them off down another lane. He was large and finely proportioned, and rode his horse magnificently; and the Morgan

under his thighs strove gallantly to do his bidding. She lay out like a hare; she seemed to float like a hawk skimming the ground, and her glorious rider sat so easily that his great weight seemed to leave her perfectly free. On swept the crescent-shaped platoon around to the left, aiming for another vast prairie to the east. On strove the gallant cream, disdaining the idea of being beaten by her own mate; her ears laid back in a frown, her nostrils distended, her breath roaring like a furnace. O! for freedom from the saddle and master, and then we should see who would lead yon troupe! All in vain; the little mare, though having the inside track, was no match for her wild, free mate, and a few minutes later the leader entered the short lane leading to the east, and the thunder of the hoofs died rapidly away in the distance. The whole matter was, that the owner of the cream-colored span had occasion to use the other, the leader, and had undertaken to drive her into a corner somewhere and catch her.

It grew to be a familiar sight, this movement of the droves, for almost daily they had a parade—without any special provoking cause. But we delighted to stir them up. Here they are, almost motionless on the prairie: some are feeding, more stand gnawing each other's withers in that way peculiar to horses; and some are in a close knot to keep away from the flies, stamping uneasily, or jostling together. As a rule they are not handsome; they are not blooded horses; they are long-haired, and mainly large-stomached and low-necked, from being always grazing.

Having nothing else to do, and being mounted on fleet horses ourselves, we youngsters, gathering the reins well in hand, ride carefully up to them. The leader is lying down, shaking her head viciously as the bot-flies strike her like bullets under the jaw. The colts and horses, never handled by man, approach us with curiosity; they have not learned the craft of the Morgan mare, who knows too well what it means to fall into the hands of man. Our own horses begin to breathe heavily, and to dance in a springing motion as the drove begin to show uneasiness. We whoop! The cream springs to her feet like a cat, and away we all go with thunder of heel and snorting breath. Ah! these clumsy colts are transformed into something wild and handsome. The lifted heads and streaming manes dignify and even give majesty to the bearers, as they move off awkwardly but swiftly, looking back with that peculiar, insulting, cunning waving of the head from one side of the body to the other, the challenge of the horse, and the tail flung out like a flag.

Home through wild prairies, where the birds nested and the
gophers whistled.

A Spoil of Office



But I am light-weight, and my horse was once leader of a similar regiment, and therefore I soon out-strip all but the savage little cream mare, who is running her best. We move side by side as evenly as two horses in harness, but my splendid little bay pulls on the bit, showing he is capable of more. The herd drops behind; I lift my cattle whip, lay it down across the cream's back, and yell like a fiend. She squats—she does not kick; she flattens like a wolf—if she kicks she is beaten—she is absolutely flying now—I can see the veins come out on her neck and the neck of Rob Roy; I can see the muscles along the spine and over the hips of the mare heave and swell, and I can *feel* the same action in Rob. Again I bring the whip down, but there is no change! The mare has done her best; she has reached the limit of her stride. Then changing the pressure of my knees, and letting the reins fall, I lean forward and shout into the ear of Rob, and his head, before held high, straightens—seems to reach beyond the mare's head—she falls behind; she wheels; she is beaten; she turns and rejoins the rest. But while Rob is glad to turn and recover his breath, that tireless mare returns to and leads the drove in countless evolutions, wheeling and charging, trotting, galloping, always on the outside track, as if to show that while Rob Roy could beat her on a short run, she was comparatively fresh, while he was winded.

As I started to say, such movements of the drove often took place without any disturbing cause, save the sheer overflow of energy, and would continue for hours at a time, covering of course many miles. The cattle never did this, but they were a great study in other respects. After the herd-law came in we were obliged to watch them, and the herds grew larger, as men united to hire a herder. But even before that time the cattle tended, like the horses, to aggregate into large bodies, and the disposition to return to the wild state was quite as marked.

We boys used to delight in the battles which resulted when two strange herds met. Being with our own so much, we grew acquainted with all the personal peculiarities of each. They were not blooded cattle, with short horns and heavy bodies, but great, rangy, piebald creatures, with long, keen horns, and wild eyes when roused. We exulted when two strong and resolute steers approached each other with the ferocious signs of battle. The lowered heads and lolling tongues; the stiffened, swelling necks; the wrinkled skin around the rolling eyes; the deep, ominous roar of their voices; the cautious, side-long approach, like skilled boxers—all these led up to the sudden crashing of the meeting skulls and horns. And then follow the straining thrusts, the sudden relaxations to get an advantage, the clashing of shaken and interlocked

horns, the deep breathing, the terrible glare of the bloodshot eyes. Now, the brindle gets the upper hold and presses the white to the ground, nearly shutting off his breath; now, the white gathers himself for one last, mighty effort, and lifting the other upon his horns, literally runs away with him.

This ends the battle; for, curiously enough, the victor in such cases is not vindictive—once fallen always beaten, is the rule with a steer or cow. Each herd had its champion, and so accurate did we become in the reading of these bovine characters that we could tell at once whether “Ol’ Brin meant business” or whether “he was only bluffin’ the other feller.” There was, however, always an element of mystery about these herds of cattle. There were times when the gentlest old family cow became frightful. Sometimes, when lying under a little tree, my horse feeding at my side, I would hear a wild savage roar, a long-drawn, powerful, raucous note, ending with an upward burst, instantly to be followed by other and fiercer roars. I spring into the saddle, for I know what that means. Some restless ranging steer has found a trace of blood. Looking out on the prairie, I see the herd running swiftly toward the solitary warrior, who, with nose held to the ground, with open mouth and curling tongue, is voicing the roused savagery within him.

The whole herd is transformed from a lazily feeding and sleeping company of cows to a drove of infuriated buffalo, rushing and crowding, roaring and bawling, fighting, struggling in a thick mass toward and around a common centre. They paw the dust or toss flakes of the sod in the air, eyes roll in white fury, feet trample; and throughout all, that thrilling, frightful, hair-uplifting bawling roar, never heard at other times, is emitted by old and young, till you imagine yourself in the midst of a den of mad lions. Anyone who has seen this most marvellous return to savagery, or heard that sound, can never forget it or confuse it with any other sight or sound. At such times we kept aloof, even when well mounted, till their rage was over. I have seen a similar return to the savage state in swine, when, in response to the grunting roar of a dam answering the squeal of a little pig, the whole herd of lazy porkers would fly at their feeder, ready to tear him in pieces.

It was a gloriously free life we young horsemen led in those early pioneer days! Not yet old enough to be put into the steady work of the farm, we were made the keepers of the stock on the plain. So we watched the wild oat grow tall till its silken plume dried hard and twisted into a barbed arrow; we watched the king-bird make its nest and catch flies for its mate; and cheered the brave little fellow as he fell again and again upon the sailing

On either hand the snow stood billowed against the fences
and amid the wide fields of corn-stalks bleached in the wind.
"The Sociable at Dudley's," Prairie Folks



hawk. We saw the flowers come out rank after rank, the roses, the pinks, the stately lilies, and the delicate silvery plume of the rattle-snake weed. We reveled in the sun and the wind, and grew hardy as Indians, with bare feet, bare browned arms and muscles like iron. We raced horses, rode on the gallop standing erect like the circus-men, rode backward, rode without saddle or bridle (guiding the horse by the mane or by the pressure of the knees), wheeling, circling about each other, or sailing straight across the flowery plain on the long wolf-like gallop of the trained ranger.

But it was not all fun. I am thinking now of long days in the fall rains, when cold and miserable I sat on my dripping horse, under my rubber blanket, and listened to the steady plash of the rain. I am thinking of long rides in the night, looking for strays, rising and falling on my faithful horse, whose heels strike dully on the sod or strike sharply in the road. The night is dark. There is no moon, and thin clouds obscure the stars. Mile after mile Rob Roy puts behind him with his steady swift lope. Faint noises are heard in the grasses. A bird springs up from the weeds.

Beside, the herding of cattle is usually a lonely business. The boy is sent off in the morning with his herd, and, taking his luncheon with him, spends the whole day there—in most cases, alone. Thus he soon exhausts the few excitements which vary the monotony of the day, and quickly the play is apt to become work. The cattle are mainly quiet, and do not stray much; battles are comparatively few, and only occasionally do they burst forth in the fury I have described. In a few days, therefore, the boy falls back upon the companionship of his horse. After he has been taught never to trot a step, but to go from the walk to the lope, he learns to be guided by the pressure of the knee of his master; he no longer feels the rein; he must stop short when chasing a steer, wheel like a flash, guided by the weight of his rider thrown on one side or the other. He must learn to race a fractious steer so nicely as to turn him in a circle back to the herd, never getting so far ahead of brindle as to allow of his turning the opposite way. All this takes time, but time is no object to the herder, and it is his proud boast finally that he can drive his herd in any direction without bridle or saddle on his horse. Visitors were always welcome.

We were not all engaged in this business of herding cattle and horses; on the contrary, the older boys were busy in the corn-field and a little later in the haying fields. We who were on the prairie invariably wished we were working at home, while our elder brothers thought we had all the fun. The fact was, too much of a thing, even a good thing, is wearisome to the

spirit. And to the lonely little soul on the plain, the flowers, the birds, the wind and the free horizon's sweep sometimes oppressed him. With companionship, they would have retained their charm longer.

My brightest memories of the prairie, therefore, date back to the times when we only had to go out each afternoon and drive the cows home to the yard. The change from work in the corn or the haying field, was delicious. It made the heart leap to swing into the saddle and go sweeping away up the lane and over the perfumed and flowery plain. It was an escape from the drag of the earth; it was like taking wing into a dustless, fragrant, free air. Small wonder that the man of to-day looks back with a tender regret to those days, re-enjoying his gay dinner among the popple trees, sailing again the wide meadow where the wild oats swirl and the blue-joint bows shiningly to the passing wind.

Slowly these prairies were plowed, fenced and sown; the wild-strawberry beds gave place to tame; the blue-joint died out, and the timothy and clover pasture took its place. Corn-fields grew larger, and work on the farm more continuous and more binding; the cattle in their pastures grew heavy, tame and uninteresting; and the boy of those regions to-day has no longer an excuse for long daily rides on a trained and fleet horse. Herding a drove of half-wild cattle on a glorious prairie no longer forms a part of boy-life on the prairie. Like the star the orators speak of, cattle-grazing of that sort has gone West; and though the boy of the day, undoubtedly, finds something that amuses him, I doubt if it compares with the strange, wild pleasure of roaming the many-colored and luxuriant wild-lands in common with the deer, the coyote, and the sailing vigilant hawk.

. . . the low swells of prairie, shrouded with faint, misty light
from the unclouded sky, the flaming colors of the trees, the
faint sound of cow-bells . . .

"Daddy Deering," Prairie Folks



V. MEADOW MEMORIES

One of the most pleasant seasons on a Western farm was that of haying, which began about the 25th of June, and lasted two or three weeks into July. Indeed, as the Western farmer looks back on this season, there is little that is not pleasant to remember. At the time of its passing it was considered distinctly “poetic,” which could hardly be said of the main business of farming, most of which needs the passage of many years or the interposition of wide atmosphere before it can appear beautiful.

The summer was at its ripest and most liberal stage of vitality, and at its greatest luxuriance of blossom, and it is not strange that even faculties dulled and deadened with incessant toil caught a little of the superabundant glow and throb of life. The corn-field, so dark green and so sweet-smelling, rippled like a sea, with a multitudinous stir and sheen, and swirl and lift; waves of green and dusk and yellow careering across; long leaves flung up like spears or shaken like a host of banners. The trees were in full leaf; the insect life was at its height, filling that air with buzzing, dancing and the light of innumerable gauzy wings.

Vast watery clouds filled the sky, moving like great sails before the lazy wind, dark with rain which they flung down momentarily like trailing garments upon the land, and then passed stately by with a roll of thunder. The birds were in fullest voice: the bobolink sailed in the sensuous air, now sinking now rising, his wonderful song thrilling in the ear like a chime of tiny silver bells; the king, bird, ever alert and aggressive, cried out sharply as he launched from the top of a poplar tree upon some buzzing insect—or swooped high into the air to fall upon some intruding hawk, trying vainly to escape this dreaded little adversary.

The grasshoppers kept up incessant snap and buzz, and out of the luxuriant, though stagnant marshes came the ever-varying chorus of the frogs, swarming below the grasses; while above, the killdeers and plovers shuttled to and fro in sounding flight, and the black-bird on the cat-tails and willows swayed and sang his most liquid note till he seemed to lose himself in sensuous delight in his own music. And over all and around all, moved the slow soft west wind, laden with the breath of the far prairies, soothing and hushing, filling the air with a slumbrous haze.

At such times to lie in the shade of the trees and forget everything but the calm and glory of nature was an inexpressible delight. To forget work, to forget to think! Ah, if the worn toiling-man in the far city might only bathe for an hour in such an atmosphere! Out of the roar of the city into the drowsy hum of a day in later June! It is the old story: “The air is only blue in the distance.” And yet we did enjoy a good deal of it, even then, when we were at work, or when as youngsters of ten or twelve we ran on errands or rode a horse to rake the hay or plow the corn. Just before the haying began there was commonly a lull in the work, for in those early days we did not raise so much corn as wheat, and the boys had time to play ball, go swimming and fishing or berrying; and I am sure I speak for thousands of Western boys when I say that this season is full of the most blessed and sunny associations.

In the ever-changing West, “haying” covers a multitude of diverse experiences. Those whose recollections extend over a term of twenty years have seen many changes in the implements of haying; from the old-fashioned scythe and rake to the patent-gear-ed-self-lifting-adjustable-front-cut meadow-king mowing machine, and the self-dumping spring-tooth horse-rake. Indeed there are even more wonderful inventions in the field. These changes are marvellous in themselves, to say nothing of the changes in human thought which necessarily accompany them.

My earliest recollections of the haying field is of going out with a brother to take a large white jug of “switchel” to the men. (The jug was swung on a pole, and we each used to accuse the other of trying to get the long end.) The men used the scythe and rake just as they do still in the rocky farms of New England; and I remember with pleasure the glorious strawberries which they tossed up on the crests of the billows of damp grass. I remember, also, with what awe we gazed at the great green frogs, sitting motionless nearby or leaping headlong into the waving grass. While still, they looked so mossy and inanimate, it was a surprise to see them move. We had little to do then but to look for berries, and tumble down the “doodles.”

But a year or two later when the boys’ freedom to come and go was ended, we began our apprenticeship in the field by “raking after.” Every farmer’s boy in the East or middle-aged man in the West will know what that means. It means a gloomy

. . . the noise of the melting water could be heard running
with musical tinkle under the ice.

"Aidgewise Feelin's," Prairie Folks





Often now,
When seated at my writing,
I lay my pencil down
And fall to dreaming, still,
Of the stern, hard days
Of the old-time Iowa seeding . . .

"Prairie Chickens," Prairie Songs

urchin with a long-handled rake, following after the huge wagon while it is loaded with hay; it means walking with bare feet on the stubble-speared, new-mown sward. I have often wondered whether if Whittier had gone into details he would not have told about sliding the feet along in the stubble to avoid being spiked, or of walking in the wheel-track for the same reason. Our meadows had the track of the mowing machine in them, and it was a blessed relief when we could strike the mark of the “bull-wheel” going our way.

All through June before the haying came on, we boys herded the cattle on the wide prairies or rode the horse in plowing corn, helping build fence, or cutting hazel-brush before the breaking plow. There was always something to do, even in “slack times.” But the days grew hotter, the grass thicker and taller, and finally on a bright cloudless morning in June, the mowing-machine buzzed merrily around the grass-lot.

It was always a joyous sound to us, this whizzing clatter of the mower. It was a delight to stand and watch the sickle as it seemed to *melt* into the timothy and clover, while the grasses, stately and fragrant, bowed to the sweep of the shining bar. The timothy heads sinking would shake out a fragrant purple dust, and the clover heads and fallen roses mingled their expiring breath while lying under the sun together. The hay was even more fragrant than the grass. All day under the sun, all night under the dew, it lay changing from grass to hay; and then the next afternoon it was ready to be raked into wind-rows and bunched, ready for the hauling together into the farm-yard.

Then it must be raked, which in the olden times was a long and hard task. I can just remember seeing a row of men using hand-rakes as they gathered the hay on a valley farm in Wisconsin, but at the same time, on the Iowan prairies, they were using a revolving rake, drawn by a horse, operated by a man walking behind. A year or two later came the Hollingsworth riding horse-rake, and by the time my generation was able to take an important part in the haying field, the rake had been so improved that a boy could run it, and it became the boy’s duty thereafter.

With what pride we rode atop the rake into the level field of sweet-smelling grass, I need not say. Three times around the margin, and the “doodling” begins. The rake rolls the hay into long and thick wind-rows, which the men with easy dexterity tumble into piles and cap in cone shape, their light and graceful forks flashing in the sun. Farther in toward the centre of the great field the mowing machine is buzzing, its sound having a drowsy swell

and fall as it pulses forward on the fitfully moving air. The men work with quick ease, with laughing colloquies and friendly contests in speed.

The Western haying field is a bright and joyous one, very unlike those in Europe which Millet and his fellows paint. Here are no bowed backs and gloomy faces, toiling in the half-light; no huge and clumsy tools; no feet thrust into huge wooden shoes; no miserable looking women straining at a load too great for their strength. The American farmer is poor enough and brutal enough, but he is not hopeless. I say “Western” haying field, because even in New England there is not the same exuberance of young life. That which first strikes the Western man when he goes East is the fact that all the old men work in the fields; whereas, in the West, the old men are comparatively few and take less share in the hard labor.

The haying-field always had a distinct and massive pleasure to us all, even when the boy grew to the point of taking a place in the work of pitching the hay; the fresh air, the merry voices of companions made it more like play than work. True, it was a warm occupation, but in the simple costume of stout shoes, trousers belted to the waist, thin calico shirts and straw hats with wide brims, we were not afraid of being rumpled or soiled. We filled our hat-crowns with green leaves, moistened our hands and “bore down” on the fork handle till the boss yelled apprehensively, “Look out there! ’f y’ bust that handle ’t ’ll be another dollar out o’ *your* pocket.” We exulted in our growing strength, used it wantonly sometimes by trying to put a whole “doodle” on at once, or by bothering the loader by pitching too fast for him.

We had no hay-barns in those days, and the harpoon fork had not yet made its appearance; so that while we escaped the hard task of mowing away, we still had the pitching to do. Last year I visited some of the large hay-farms in Northern Iowa, and saw machines which gathered the hay out of the swath and elevated it to the top of the wagon. I saw hay forks which put a huge load of hay into barns holding hundreds of tons, with five or six forkfuls. I saw mowing machines cutting swaths seven feet wide, drawn by a single span of horses. So goes the West!

It is impossible to think of working in those haying fields without recalling a hundred things which made up the day. The call to dinner was not the least of the pleasant things surrounding ns. After a long and hard forenoon in the hot July sun, we went prepared to enjoy to the utmost our simple fare and the hour’s respite from the sun. Then there

. . . the wind comes across the lazily murmuring leaves
laden with a warm, sickening smell drawn from the rapidly
growing, broad-flung banners of the corn.

"Among the Corn Rows," Main-Travelled Roads



was the delicious preparatory ceremonial at the well when we soused our head and ears in the horse-trough or the immense pail standing near for the purpose. Sometimes, when we were specially hot and dusty, we dashed the cold water upon each other's heads and shoulders from a dipper, and so, cooled and cleansed, went in to the dinner table.

Food at this time of the year was abundant and of good variety: the strawberries or red raspberries were in full bearing; all manner of "green things" were plenty; and the table possessed a rude, wholesome abundance—and needed it. There was no ceremony at those meals; no man wore a coat, napkins were "against the law," and steel forks merely supplemented the knives. There was no waiting on the table, and there were no courses. All the food was placed before us at once, and the boss would say, "Now boys, do your purtiest. Get all y' c'n see; an' what yer' can't see, yell fer."

Then what a delightful half-hour when we lay under the trees on the grass and "let our dinner settle," catching momentary dreams in the midst of the indescribable charm of a noon in midsummer, gazing at the sky and listening to the wind in the popple leaves till the boss cried, "Pull out, boys; pull out!"

The weather was nearly always bright and very warm, the sun rising in cloudless splendor each day, though during the middle hours vast domes of dazzling white clouds, half-sunk in misty blue, would appear encircling the horizon. The boss kept an anxious eye on these thunder-heads, regulating the amount of cutting, by the signs of the sky. Then sometimes the hot afternoon air would take on an oppressive density; the wind would die away almost to a calm, or blow fitfully from the south, while in the far west a vast dome of inky clouds, silent, portentous, would rise, filling the horizon, swelling like a bubble, having the weight of a glacier. The birds, bees and insects, usually so vocal, would suddenly sink silent, as if awed by the first deep mutter of the storm.

All hands then hasten to get the hay in order, that it may shed the rain. We hurry as only adept pitchers can. We roll up the wind-rows by getting fork and shoulder under one end, tumble it over and over endwise till it is large enough—then go back for the scatterings which are placed with a deft turn of the fork on the top to cap the pile. We laugh and shout as we race across the fields; we are wet to the skin with perspiration; our hats are flung aside; the boy on the rake puts his horse to the trot.

Nearer and nearer comes the storm, silent no longer. We stop to listen. Far away is heard a low, steady, crescendo, grim roar; but there is not yet a breath of air from the clouds; the

storm-wind has not readied us; the wind of the south has died away at last; the frogs in the marsh and the fearless king-bird alone cry out in the ominous gloom cast by the tempest.

Ah, there it comes! The black is turning to the gray of the falling rain. See it sweeping on! Now it strikes the corn-field, sending a mighty wave sweeping across it. Now it reaches the hedgerow, and the spire-like poplars bow to it. Now it strikes the hay-field, and see! the caps of the cones go flying; the hay streams in the wind like a woman's hair. In an instant our work is undone, and the hay opened to the drenching rain.

As we rush for the house, the roaring rain bursts upon us like a charge of cavalry. The lightning breaks forth from the blinding gray cloud of rain falling like a flood. As we look up, we see the streams of fire go rushing across the sky like the burst of a rocket. A moment more and the solid sheets of water fall upon the landscape, shutting it from view, but the thunder sounds sharp and splitting in the near distance, to go deepening and bellowing off down the illimitable spaces of the sky and plain.

In the east is still to be seen a faint crescent of the sunny sky, rapidly being lost as the storm sweeps on; but as that is closed, a similar crescent, faint, watery and gray, appears in the west, as the clouds break away. It widens, grows yellow, and then red; then blazes out into an inexpressible glory of purple and gold, as the storm moves on to the east. The thunder grows deeper and dies to a retreating mutter, and is lost. The thunder-cloud's dark presence has passed over us to the east. The trees are glorious with light, the birds take up their songs again, the air is deliciously cool. The corn stands bent as if still acknowledging the majesty of the tempest. Everything is new-washed, clean of dust, and a faint, moist, indefinable odor is everywhere.

The hay is spoiled—at least much damaged—but the shower has done so much good, no one finds heart to complain. What is a little hay compared to the wheat crop? It was often the pleasant duty of the boys on evenings like this to mount horse and ride away on the prairie to bring up the cows.

The roads are wet and plashy, responding to the steady lope of the horse with a slapping sound; but the prairie, ah, the prairie! In full flower, fragrant, green and yellow and white with blossoms and leaves, fresh from the rain, while a strong, cool wind is wafted from the clearing west, the prairie was intoxicatingly, exaltingly beautiful. Words fail; song itself cannot express it:

To the north, as far as I could see, the land billowed like a
russet ocean, with scarcely a roof to fleck its lonely spread.

A Son of the Middle Border





. . . I came to catch through the corners of my eyes sudden glimpses of a radiant world which vanished as magically as it came.

"Impressionism," Crumbling Idols

My Western land, I love thee yet!
In dreams I ride my horse again,
And breast the breezes blowing fleet
From out the meadows cool and wet.
From fields of flowers growing sweet
And flinging incense to the breeze:
The wild oats swirl across the plain,
I feel their dash against my knees
Like rapid splash of running seas.

Even haying, when contrasted with such moments as these, was a drudgery. To feel the lift and swell of the strong horse, to see the wild colts racing and chasing in sheer overflow of life, to hear the deep bellow of battling bulls, to meet companions horsed like ourselves, and to shout and race in sheer abandonment to the impulse of the hour was a joy inexpressible then, and a priceless memory now.

I am thinking now of many night-rides after strayed calves, or after the wandering herd itself, driven by the rain or the stampeding of the horses far from their usual feeding-ground. I am thinking of the steady gallop of my horse through the black night, over the prairie, where a step into a badger-den or fox's hole might send horse and boy in a heap down in the darkness. On we go through the wet grass; on through patches of hazel that spitefully whips my stirrup-shield; on, peering into the darkness, pulling up now and again to listen for the tinkling of a familiar bell; now skirting apprehensively the edge of a large grove of popples and crab-apples, and then plunging down a decline into one of the wide meadows where the blue-joint and wild-oats stand breast high, wet and tangled with the rain.

Now comes in the steady, monotonous cling-clang of the bell as the sober herd winds slowly along the wet path, homeward. Birds fly up from the ground, and a stealthy rustle in the grass tells that the terrifying little marauder, the skunk, is abroad. An occasional owl passes by, and curious pauses and colloquies come into the noisy pools. As we re-enter the settlement, lights appear, dogs begin to bark, and now the men meet us at the bars, the bell having told of our approach. We are wet to the thigh with the lash of the bushes and wild-oats, and we hasten to the fire, for the night air is chilly—leaving to the rest the task of

milking. Beside the welcome fire we sit and eat supper while the steam rises from our wet garments. Fire-flies are shining in the grass; a tree-toad on the roof is singing.

But these experiences passed away as the wild lands were enclosed and broken up. Lanes took the place of trails; cattle in the pastures grew heavy and slow, losing all flavor of the buffalo and elk. Of course there were other contrasts in farm-life, but none quite so absolute as when we left off haying or harvest, and rode forth on the grassy, fragrant plain after the cattle.

There was another experience in haying, however, which had almost equal value with the boys, and which also has passed away with the settlement of the land: and that was cutting the grass on the unfenced wild meadows. Cutting the prairie grass came in July, and also in the fall after the wheat harvest. The meadow came first and the upland grass later, but in both cases these opportunities to cut on the prairie grew scarcer year by year and farther from the homestead, a thing which we did not regret, as it gave an added charm to the work of cutting and hauling it to the farm-yard.

Sometimes a camp was made several miles from home, and the nights were spent under the wagon on the ground. At any rate the dinner was eaten in the open air under the popple trees, with all the flavor of wild berries and the smell of green things growing. There were evenings spent beside a little smoking fire under the edge of the wagon, evenings full of peculiar charm, the frogs singing, the katydids and mosquitoes sounding, and the night-hawks booming hoarsely as they swooped whizzingly down near our heads as if to see what we were.

Again, the experiences were not unmixed delights. On sultry evenings, a shower threatening, the mosquitoes bit mercilessly, and no amount of smoking in the “smudge” or rolling up in the blankets availed; their insidious, pestilential hum penetrated to the ear. And then later the shower came up, the thunder shook the ground, the lightning lit up the prairie almost momentarily, though the storm was far distant. To boyish eyes the landscape had suddenly become a mysterious, terrifying thing. The popple-trees, laced against the sky, the lifted heads of the startled horses, the machinery standing in the midst of the hay-cocks, would all appear for an instant as something new and strange, and a moment later be swallowed up as if by a sea of ink rolling over it all. At such moments it was considered an ominous thing to see a large owl rise from the neighboring tree-tops and flap away into the darkness and the rain.

And the fields grew green
With the mighty mystery
Of springing grain . . .

"Spring on the Prairie," Prairie Songs





The sun-lit prairie with groves and streams,
The rich grasses, the undisturbed primeval wild
All gone, all gone!
Swallowed up, lost irretrievably.
My heart aches with longing for it.

"The Passing of the Buffalo," Prairie Songs

And then in the morning, when, drenched, cold and hungry, we strove to kindle a fire, crawling about in the faint, gray dawn, we heartily wished ourselves at home in our snug beds under the sloping roof. But these bad nights came but seldom, and we soon got limbered up as the sun blazed out, and the birds took up their irrepressible song, and the terrors of the night passed away like its clouds.

In most cases, moreover, the farmer did not go so far away from his home, and only “camped out” at the dinner hour, going home at night. The hay on the uplands was dryer and lighter, and could be cut and raked the same day, that mown in the early morning being ready to haul to the stack at night. So we rode home every night on the huge loads of fresh hay, from which no dew nor rain had stolen the sweetness.

There were noisy rides in the early dawn, when, with huge rattling rack and flapping binding-pole on stout wagons, we clattered and whooped along the road to the meadow. And there were silent rides home at night, when the stars were coming out, when the wagon had a low and sleepy *chuck*, *chuckle*, and we (half-buried in the top of the mountainous load) listened to the myriad of insect voices in the grass, and the trills of the singers in the pools. The horses move on swift and strong, eager to reach their stalls. Through the still air, we can hear the voices of women and children sounding from the houses scattered along the way; the sun has long since set, but the illimitable west is yet filled with a sea of undazzling gold, whereon there seem to ride vessels of red gold with flame-bright sails.

Now we reach the gate, where Rover stands to greet us, and through the open doors of the kitchen we can see the table spread for us. Then comes the dropping of tugs and neck-yokes, much clatter about the barn, and then, hurrah for supper! Ah! would the epicure get the worth of his trouble, let him spend a day in the wild haying-field, handling the fork vigorously, and go home at night on a load of hay full of pungent weeds and resinous shrubs, plunge his head in a bucket of cold water at the well, and then he will be ready to run a race for place at a supper of salt pork and potatoes.

At such times, as we sat around the cheerful table and “pitched into” the supply of eatables, somebody usually voiced the general sentiment of the crowd by saying “campin’ out ’s all right fer a change, but hardly the thing fer a stiddy business”; and adding for the benefit of the smiling women: “A man *can* cook if he wants to, but genrully speaking he *don’t want* to.”

VI. MELONS AND EARLY FROSTS

September and October in those early pioneer days in Iowa, as in Dakota now, were taken up with the work of stacking and threshing the grain and plowing the land ready for next season’s crop. The vast fields of wheat, with all their wealth of color and motion, the *swash* of green-and-gold seas, had given place to the beautifully mottled stubble, which had in turn bleached to a dull yellow by the time the stacking began.

The shocks standing thickly over the level fields were sagging and weather-beaten, eaten by gophers below and by the chickens and black-birds above. The ferocious heat and hurry of harvest were over, and the superb intervals of warm, hazy days and cool clear nights were upon us before we drove into the field to begin the work of stacking the grain—a delightful and by no means hard task.

It had all the aspect of a “bee” which the harvest had and more, for now began the time of “changing works,” and the crew was made up in most cases of the boys of adjoining farms, and in the house the girls assisted (?) each other, and “harvest dances” often ended the day’s labor in the field and in the house, while the vast dull-red harvest moon swung up the sky.

Early in the cool morning the McTurg boys came rattling down the road, with many a wild whoop and whistle, trying to catch us at breakfast, and it was our usual greeting to inquire what time of the night they got up. By half-past six we drove into the field; two teams, four men and a boy making up the crew: one to pitch upon the wagons, two to drive and load, and one to stack.

The sun is flaming through a mist that wraps the horizon like a garment, and clings to the jeweled grass like a silver-wrought bridal veil. All is silent, save the flute-like call of the meadow-lark breaking out of the mist. The corn rustles huskily now and again, as if in thoughtful, intermittent speech, upon the mystery of time and the decay which is falling upon the land. The grain in large shock-rows, weather-beaten as granite, has lost all its color and motion, but its sweetness is still hoarded in the amber, beautifully clear-colored berries beneath the chaff.

With a shout the pitching begins in the field, and soon the load, vast and square, is drawn to the stack-yard to be unloaded into the hands of the stacker. Now, it is an art to pitch bundles and do it well. As the stacker goes round and round, laying the sheaves in

How sweetly you sang as you circled
The elm's rugged knees in the sod,
I know! for deep in the shade of your willows,
A barefooted boy with a rod,
I lay in the drowsy June weather,
And sleepily whistled in tune
To the laughter I heard in your shallows,
Involved with the music of June!

"A Winter Brook," Prairie Songs





The corn fields showed their yellow-green rows of timid shoots, and cattle on the pastures luxuriated in the fullness of the June grass . . .

A Spoil of Office

handsome, regular order, the pitcher must place each sheaf with its head “just so,” and do it regularly and rapidly, for the other driver is loading up and is likely to catch us.

But here is the place where the boy comes in nicely. As the stacker goes around on the further side, it is the boy’s duty to catch the bundles deftly on his fork and turn them for the stacker (Ah! how many days we have stood there and turned bundles!) till he gets on the nearer side and the driver can throw them into place again; then down drops boy into a hollow of the stack to shell out some wheat between his hands to make “gum”—delectable morsel!

A boy naturally wants to do everything, and nothing very long. No matter how enjoyable a new job may be it soon grows old with a boy. He is a natural experimenter—necessarily—and is always wanting to do the precise thing he can’t do. Set him to turning bundles and he longs to pitch from the wagon to the stacker, though he could not get one bundle in four across the stack.

How delightful it seemed the first forenoon to stand on the growing stack, facing the glorious autumn wind, counting the number of stacks in sight, hearing the jokes and songs of the young men, and tossing the heavy-headed sheaves! But, alas! how exceedingly tired of it we became after a day or two. Did we not drop with the most amazing readiness into the stack on the far side, and rise to our duty again a few moments later most reluctantly! Especially one of those days, familiar to every Western boy, when a hot wind, steady, powerful and persistent swept up from the fervid south making the ripening corn hiss and roar like a sea on a shingly beach; a wind that rushed over the stubble like the sweep of a terrible great scythe, invisible, and sounding for very swiftness; a wind that drove the chaff into our faces like shot and lifted the side of the stack—boy and all; and laughed, and howled, and snarled in our ear like a crazed demon. O, those mighty equatorial winds! All day while the sun shone and the dazzling plain lay dimmed by a faint garment of mist, that steady, relentless, furious wind swept on.

But if pitching was an art, stacking was a fine art! A perfect stack is just the figure of an egg set upright on the larger end. It is ten feet in diameter at the bottom, twenty at the “bulge,” and tapers to a rounding top at a height of twenty-three or twenty-four feet. Simple as it may seem, there are more men in farming regions who can build a good house than such a stack. And this is not all. The purpose of the stack is not to look like an egg, nor to look well, but to shed the rain and to shed it perfectly.

Not to go into details, the bundles must be laid in regular concentric rings, butts outward, the “courses” rising as they come toward the centre. This is called “keeping your middle full,” and it is a very praiseworthy thing in this case to keep your middle very full and firm. I can not conceal the professional’s pride, and must go a little greater length into particulars. Now the sheaves as they sit for a week or two in the shock acquire a certain “slouch” or slant by sitting leaning upon the centre sheaves. Therefore, when we would “carry the stack straight up,” we turn the bundles edgewise. When we commence to “bulge” or “lay out” we turn the long side up, thus making several inches additional projection each round. When the bulge is sufficiently large (its size depending upon the skill of the stacker) we commence to “draw in” by placing the long side of the bundle down, the reverse of bulging.

Oh! with what care did the stacker make his slow rounds (on the big bulge) on his knees, carefully shoving the bundles out on the outside course and holding them with his knee; and with what pride he looked upon his portly cones (standing, when finished, like dancers, four in a place, about the broad fields), no one but himself will ever know. As he heard the murmured praise of the hired men his heart swelled with pride.

“By jinks! She’s a linger! aint she, Bill?”

“She’s a reg’ler al’ snorter an’ *no* mistake. That filleh c’n stack, *he* can!”

It was hard work, too, stacking was; hard all round. The knees of the stacker’s trousers wore out, and innumerable patches of the most iron-clad material were laid on, one over the other, till their owner had the air of being knock-kneed and “sprung.” Then the back of his hands swelled because of the muscular force used in seizing the bundles, and pressing them into place; and the sheaves often struck him in the face, and briars got into his hands. If it were barley, the beards crawled all over his shrinking flesh, gnawing and stinging.

But it was cheery and pleasant, not so hard as the harvest, yet having men enough to be almost equally lively—and then there were the melons! We used to think that it was a sort of providential arrangement that “worter melons” should get ripe just in stacking time. And such melons! they seemed to grow spontaneously with us. Sometimes a farmer would scatter seeds from his pocket as he broke, and afterwards have thousands of melons rotting when the frosts of the autumn came. But that was a new land. As the country grew older they required a little more care, but not much.

The sky, aflame with orange and gold clouds, was thrown into loftier relief by the serrate blue rim of trees that formed the western horizon.

A Spoil of Office





I'd like that farm; it's a good farm, but it's all run down,
an' so 'm I.

"Under the Lion's Paw," Main-Travelled Roads

As the country settled up a little more thickly it became necessary moreover to have the “patch” near the house or deep in some tall, dark corn-field, for the boys got into the way of “cooning” on cool, clear nights. I’ll not stop to detail the precise methods of “cooning.” (I would be under the necessity of collecting outside testimony.) Suffice it to say that it consists of taking a sack (to put your coon in) on your left arm, and a club in the other, and in *scooting* through cornfields, through interminable rows again and again till—

What I started to say was that in stacking time the heat, and dust, and labor was made of no account by the great red-cored melons which we brought out in the morning and put under the edge of the stack to keep cool till the middle of the forenoon; then, “Come in, all hands,” and the big round fellows disappeared as quickly as the dew which lay upon their cool, green sides at break of day. For cool as were the nights, the days were warm and often still. There was a kind of day the exact opposite of the windy day described above, when the ground seemed to pulsate with the heat of the September sun, and the air was still—so still that the buzzing of the flies and snapping of the grasshoppers’ wings rose with startling distinctness from the hush; so still, the corn moved not a banner and the hawk’s flight grew labored as he hunted over the russet fields, while the clouds hung motionless in the radiant sky.

In the forenoon of such a day, the “Mountain Sweet” or the pink-fleshed “Peerless,” rich in the summer’s sweetness and laved in the coolness of the autumn nights, had a value impossible at any other place or time. In the shade of the stack, where the crickets chimed dully and the grasshoppers fell with a pattering like rain drops, prone on the ground, the melon in the centre of a laughing circle, we drew to a feast such as the satiated gods on old Olympus dreamed not of. “The quality of the feast lieth mainly in the appetite wherewith ye sit down withal.” Mainly, but not entirely, good philosopher; the vast, cool “Mountain Sweet” or fragrant “Cantaleup” had something to do therewith.

Slowly the stack tapers to a rounded top, and its shadow lengthens along the sun-bright stubble.

“Who has ‘the honors’ this pop?”

“Bill’s the lucky man.”

The boss figured it so’s Bill could exercise his muscle. “Come, git into place, Bill. Bear down on y’r fork—that’s right. Bill’s hide has been just crackin’ with strength all day. He’s been afraid the honors would come on Luke agin.”

Bill braces himself, and begins sending the bundles whizzing high into the air, while the rest lean on their forks and jeer.

“A little more steam, Billy. He can’t come down half-way to meet his bundles.”

Just as the sun is going down, the stacker stands erect like a figure of Victory on a monument, and surveys the glorified landscape, then slides down the side, and, ho! for the supper table.

Some days were always spent in stacking the oats in the barn-yard, where the straw could be banked up for winter use, and these were the pleasantest of all the harvest days, for it was near the house where the girls could come out and chat occasionally and show their pretty calico gowns. The kitchen was so handy that we could smell the dough-nuts frying, and hear the plates being laid for dinner. Attracted by the swarms of crickets and grasshoppers falling out of the grain, the chickens and turkeys came crowding noisily about the stack, singing joyously in their harsh strange fashion as if giving thanks for their unexpected feast.

Neighbors passing by on their way to town stopped to “gas” in the Western fashion.

“Say! Adams?”

“Hello!”

“Y’r stack’s tarnin over.”

“O, get out.”

“You bet it *is*. You’ll slide off in another minute. Say!”

“Say it y’rself; y’ve got y’r mouth open.”

“Go’n’ to have a shindig t’ wind up on?”

“Mebbe.”

“Wal! don’t leave me out, ’r I’ll bust y’r biler. Who’s go’n’ t’ play f’r y’? Dave McTurg?”

“Uh-hm.”

“That’s bully! When y’ go’n’ to thrash?”

“O! in a week ’r two.”

“Wan’ to change works, of course?”

“*You* bet! When *you* goin’ to start in?”

“Monday. Come over.”

“I’ll be there—t’ breakfast.”

“Yaas! You’re likely to. If y’ do, I’ll—”

“Say, drive on there. Howdy s’pose Adams is goin’ t’ build a ten-foot bulge with you a clockin’ away like an ol’ guinny-hen. Git.”

This sweet, glorious hour effaced it all.

"The Return of a Private," Main-Travelled Roads





Groves heavy with foliage, rivers curving away into the glooms of bending elm and bass-wood trees, fields of wheat and corn alternating with smooth pastures where the cattle fed—a long panorama of glorified landscape which his escape from manual labor now enabled him to see the beauty of . . .

A Spoil of Office

Hardly a team passing but had its fling at the stacker or some neighborhood news to talk over in a lazy moderate drawl—the speaker seated with his hands holding the lines and his arms on his knees, while his team fought flies and trundled the heavy load of wheat on the hard dry road. Frequently a brace of boys or the wife or sister would be perched high on the sacks of grain behind. If a woman were thus seen, the remark was invariably made,

“There goes a man with a mortgage on *his* wheat.”

Sometimes a drove of cattle, on the way to market, passed along the road, driven by two or three boys on horseback and a couple of men in a wagon. It was one of the most delightful tasks for the boy, this being invited to help drive in a drove of steers. Here the abilities of the boy struck like a star, indeed, very oft against the clumsiness and inefficiency of the older men. On his trained pony, swinging his short-handled, long-lashed whip, the herd-boy was a host in himself. Sometimes all the morning would be consumed in getting the herd into a “bunch”—some headstrong steer being determined to lead the herd back to freedom, but he had to succumb at last to the superior skill of the pony and the herder.

As we stood on our stack and watched the herd go trampling and crowding past, when we thought of the ice-cream and peaches that boy was sure to have, in addition to a dollar in clear cash, we grew envious, and replied to his merry shouts but indifferently gay.

But the most charming hour of all was as the night fell, and the lamps were lighted in the house and preparations for supper began. The crickets increased their shrill chorus, and the rumble of wagons and voices of men in the fields sounded near and distinct. The cattle came snuffing and lowing round the bars, surprised at being fenced out from their usual yard; then came the supper, a noisy, hearty meal, with melons for dessert, and finally the doing of the chores finished the day. One day was very like another thereafter, till the stacking and plowing was done; pleasant by contrast with heat and hardship of harvest, and with the cold and weariness of the husking soon to come. Meanwhile, the life of the herder on the prairies grew more and more irksome. The cattle, finding the grass getting dry and tasteless, grew restless and hard to manage. They roamed largely and stampedes were frequent, and the boy and pony found plenty to do. No more summer siestas under the poplar groves, listening to the king-bird and bob-o’-link. No more plunging into the clear, cool pools of the river, where the long grasses dipped and swung in the current, and

the kingfisher darted by; no more berries, sweet, warm strawberries, or thimble-shaped blackberries. It was work, hard work, and lonesome work, too. In contrast, stacking was infinitely more pleasurable, and the thought of the pleasant dinner-table and the lunch of melons was distressing.

Then came days when the wind moaned with a new-old sound through the poplar trees; the skies would be leaden and sunless for days, and finally a cold northeast rain would set in, washing the color out of the leaves, silencing the lark and the crickets, blurring the russet landscape with gray, driving clouds, and filling the roads with mud. A cold, drizzling, lonesome, uncomfortable, unprofitable time, such as makes me shudder to think of to this day!

Such days brought out the gloom, the barrenness and discomfort, the abject poverty and pitifulness of farm-life, to a degree well-nigh maddening. The men sat around the kitchen stove, their coarse and filthy wet garments steaming in the heat of the fire; their great boots, muddy and soaked with water, tracking the floor till it looked like a sty. In the barn all was desolate, cold and wet; the chickens pattered around forlornly, the cattle in the yard patiently stood with raised backs toward the driving rain; only the horses in their stalls ground their hay cheerily and enjoyed the rest from ploughing.

On such days the boys were superfluous. There didn’t seem to be any place where they were not in the way—except when a pail of water was wanted from the well or an armful of wood from the wood-pile; and there were innumerable sharp reprimands for not wiping their feet on the mat. But the herd-boys suffered most during such a “spell of weather.” All day alone on the prairie, dripping with the cold rain, damp and chilled under our ill-smelling rubber-blankets. There were drear sounds in the tall blossomless grasses and in the poplar groves where the hazel-nut (our only solace) was ripening. The landscape was wet and deserted, for even the distant houses showed no sign of life. Nothing to cheer us save the thought of the warm fireside and warm supper awaiting us. By contrast the home-life grew cheerful and home-comforts came to possess extraordinary meaning as we sat against the fire and dried our sodden garments.

Those were dark days. This farm life it will be seen was attractive, not because of the home-life so much, as because of the superb setting of color and light in the atmosphere and landscape. The farm-houses of the American farmers, East and West, have little in themselves to make them attractive, and it takes but a long cold rain to bring out the terrible contrast of

The wind sang in her ears; the great clouds, beautiful as heavenly ships, floated far above in the vast, dazzling deeps of blue sky . .

"Lucretia Burns," Prairie Folks





Whatever he may do unconsciously, the artist must
consciously stand before nature and before life.

"New Fields," Crumbling Idols

the brilliant landscape on fair days, and the gloom and narrowness of the home-life at all times. There is no gilding of setting sun or glamor of poetry to light up the ferocious and endless toil of the farmers' wives. I can hardly recall what I have seen of their lives at this distance, without tears. Slaves on the tread-mill or in the Roman galleys could not have endured greater hardships than many of these women. Sallow, weazened, old before their time, with a dull, patient, hopeless look on their faces; condemned to a life of littleness and vacuity, occupied in running from stove to pantry, from cradle to frying-pan; compelled to wear the same calico dress a year or two and to approach "him" with fear and trembling to get a dollar for another—there is no poetry connected with their lives, save the sombre and tragic.

We (boys and men) went out from the dingy narrow walls to revel in the light and air. However beautiful may be the natural surroundings, and there is always the charm of earth and sky, there is no touch of beauty in the average American farm-house.

The men in general terms, make of the house a feeding station, a place to warm themselves in and a place to sleep. Surrounded by sties and litter, and animals swarming with flies, bare-walled, it was a prison for the patient women who had long since abandoned hope. O, weird sisters! deliver me and mine from life on the farm in the rainy season, and when the dust flies and the grass withers!

It did not occur to the boys, then, to pity the women; they were so occupied with their own joys and grievances. A wider experience has taught some of them how heroic was the life of mother or sister. The supply of reading (or amusement) in the house, was scant. Two or three well-thumbed subscription-books, *The Tribune* and the county paper, made up the library in most homes. Some had more, some less. Cards were mainly frowned upon. During any "let up" in the rain, we slipped out to pitch a game of "quates," using horse-shoes, or to do chores in the mud and slush of the barn-yard. Even the melons had lost their savor.

At last one of these interminable days ends with a crescent of glorious light opening in the west as the sun goes down. "If it clears to-night look out for a frost" would be the saying of the weatherwise, and sure enough the next morning the frost lay white and glistening on every board, or stone, or broad leaf. The air perfectly still, is literally intoxicating with its stinging invigoration. The mirage appears, the horizon is as if lifted up and the grain stacks are like the walls of a great city.

The frost is quickly gone, but its effects do not appear till noon, indeed not till the next day. The unprotected vines and plants by noon are withered and blackened as if scorched

by a passing flame. In a day or two the corn begins to rustle drearily in that peculiar moving, intermittent way, sighing hoarsely, as if announcing the swift approach of winter. There is something profoundly moving in this rustling of the sear corn. The wind thereafter takes on a new sound, a hoarse wailing intermixed with wild, sharp whispered colloquies like awed entreaties.

Plowing was the main business of the days after stacking was finished, and the big lonesome acres of bleaching stubble looked very large to us then, for many of the plow-boys still walked, though the riding plow was getting more and more common. We, older boys, in later years saw Johnny riding about under an umbrella reading or eating a melon, the reins tied round his shoulders, and legs crossed comfortably. Johnny read various startling yarns from the *New York Tomahawk*, while riding on the plow.

Nevertheless, in spite of the melons, papers, umbrellas, and other ameliorating circumstances, plowing got monotonous, and John looked forward despairingly as he thought of the unthinkable number of times he must needs go back and forth across the level field when the bleak winds began to sorely ruffle. His lips and hands chapped in the sun and wind, and on cold days his coat-collar chafed his chin. There were few breaks to this life, and the boy longed (like the old fisherman in "Cape Cod Folks") for a change of season. No matter how pleasant the "ale-wife season" opened, it grew a weariness and the "herring season" a blessed change.

The white frost was always significant of great change to us on the farm. It told of the coming of shorter days, ripening corn and of the closing in of the home-life. It was as if Time, sleeping through dreamful September days, suddenly awoke and lifted his head, made a vast desolating sweep of his scythe, strode powerfully forward, then rapt with the glory of color which burned under his searing feet, fell dreaming again—and it was Indian summer on the plain; and the clouds soared and the crickets wildly sang in the brief heat of the noon; the hawk pursued the swift grouse; the stars at night, while the frosts fell, burned in innumerable hosts in the unspeakable depth of sky, but by day the October plain slept under a soft, warm haze of smoke, so heavy (or so impalpable) the wind moved it not, and it dimmed the fierce face of the sun. A treacherous truce, soon to be broken by the onset of the snow.

The cornfield, dark-green and sweetly cool, is beginning to ripple in the wind with multitudinous stir of shining, swirling leaf.

A Son of the Middle Border



ANNOTATIONS

I. THE HUSKIN’

- 24 John:** elsewhere referred to as “little John,” apparently the son of John, the hired man.
- 24 sulky plow:** a two-wheeled riding plow, first introduced in 1864 and in widespread use in Iowa by 1880 (Leo Rogin, *The Introduction of Farm Machinery in Its Relation to the Productivity of Labor in the Agriculture of the United States During the Nineteenth Century* [Berkeley, University of California Press, 1931], 39). (See fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. Pfeil’s Sulky Plow, 1866. (From Leo Rogin, *The Introduction of Farm Machinery in Its Relation to the Productivity of Labor in the Agriculture of the United States During the Nineteenth Century* [Berkeley, University of California Press, 1931], 37.)

- 24 Frank:** Franklin McClintock Garland (1863-1945), Garland’s brother.
- 33 Roderick Dhu:** a character in *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), a long poem by Walter Scott. The “Saxon” is James Fitz-James, who is King James V in disguise and who speaks these lines in Canto V.
- 36 that verse of Whitcomb Riley:** from “A Summer’s Day,” in *“The Old Swimmin’-hole,” and ’Leven More Poems* (1883), by James Whitcomb Riley. Garland began corresponding with Riley in October 1887 and in a favorable review of *Afterwhiles* (1887) also praised *“The Old Swimmin’-hole”* (“James Whitcomb Riley,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 12 Dec. 1887). Garland particularly admired Riley’s dialect poems and regarded him as one of the foremost practitioners of local color in American literature.

II. THE THRASHIN’

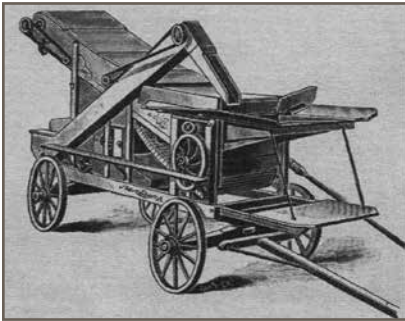
- 37 Hand-rake reaper:** a horse-drawn machine in which a blade cuts the wheat, which then falls onto a platform, usually requiring two workers: one to drive the horse, and another to rake the wheat off the platform to then be bound into sheaves. Leading manufacturers were Hussey and McCormick, who introduced their models in the 1830s. In the 1850s, both manufacturers developed self-rake reapers, in which a mechanism raked the wheat onto the ground to be bound into sheaves, thereby greatly increasing productivity. (See figs. 2, 3.)



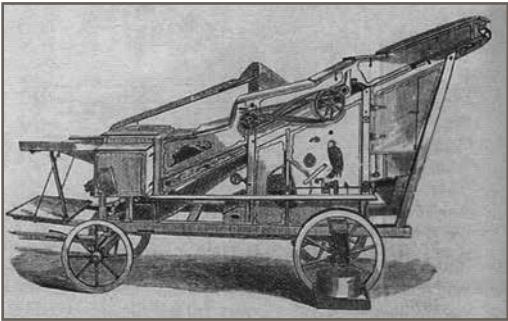
Left: Fig. 2. The Champion No. 2 Mower with a hand-raking attachment, ca. 1860s. The image illustrates the raker braced against a leaning post as he rakes the cut wheat. (From C. H. Wendel, *Encyclopedia of American Farm Implements & Antiques* [Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 19970, 303.]) **Right:** Fig. 3. McCormick Advance Self-Rake Reaper, 1871. (From C. H. Wendel, *Encyclopedia of American Farm Implements & Antiques*, 301.)

- 40 Uncle David and William McTurg:** that is, David and William McClintock, brothers of Garland’s mother. In *A Son of the Middle Border*, Garland recalls that his Uncle David had moved to a nearby farm and frequently helped with farm work. When he came to write his autobiography, Garland recycled portions of the “Boy Life” sketches and shifted their chronology, in particular placing the events of “The Thrashin’” in Wisconsin during his eighth year and beginning Chapter 5, “The Last Threshing in the Coulee,” with the substitution of “Wisconsin” for “Iowa”: “Life on a Wisconsin farm, even for the women, had its compensations.” Most of the chapter follows the events and some of the language of “The Thrashin’.”
- 41 The machine was a “J. I. Case” or a “Buffalo Pitts”:** once the wheat was cut and bound into sheaves, the grain needed to be separated from the stalks, and to this end a

number of threshing machines were patented during the 1840s and 1850s. Among the most successful were the Buffalo Pitts Thresher (fig. 4), manufactured by John A. Pitts in Buffalo, N.Y., and the J. I. Case Thresher, manufactured in Racine, Wis. (fig. 5). The machine was mounted on a truck and combined the actions of threshing (removing the grain from the heads of the stalk), separating (removing the grain from the straw), and winnowing (separating the grain from the chaff). Sheaves of grain were fed into a revolving cylinder which contained spikes that beat the grain heads from the stalks. In his “Author’s Notes” to a school edition of *Boy Life on the Prairie*, Garland described the ensuing action: the threshed grain and straw emerged on an “endless broad belt three feet or more wide and eight or



Left: Fig. 4. Pitts Thresher, ca. 1850s. (From C. H. Wendel, *Encyclopedia of American Farm Implements & Antiques*, 331.) **Right:** Fig. 5. The Case Eclipse Thresher, ca. 1870s. (From C. H. Wendel, *Encyclopedia of American Farm Implements & Antiques*, 334.)



ten feet long made of canvas and two-inch slats set on edge. It revolved on two rollers. The straw rode on top of the slats while the chaff and wheat were carried in the crevices between the slats. The straw was delivered to the carrier, which elevated it to the stack, while the wheat and chaff dropped into a fanning mill, where the chaff was cleaned from the wheat” (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1926, 327). The machine was driven by a horse-powered sweep (see fig. 6), which consisted of a central gear driven by as many as six teams of horses, harnessed to poles, moving in a circle, with tumble rods connecting the gear to the thresher.

45 play a game of “hi! spy”: in his “Author’s Notes” to the Allyn and Bacon edition of *Boy Life*, Garland describes the game:

The players began each game by standing in a circle while some one counted out, pointing at each player and pronouncing a word of the following ancient rime simultaneously:

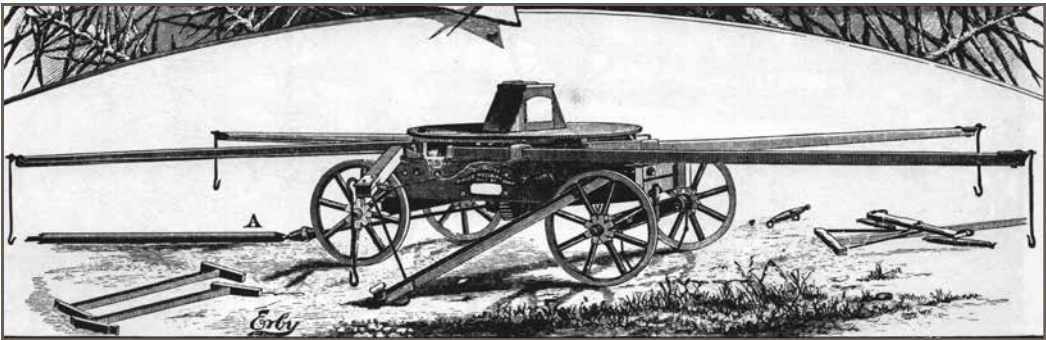


Fig. 6. Dingee-Woodbury Horse Power, a sweep driven by eight to ten horses. (From Marvin McKinley, *Wheels of Farm Progress*, 5th ed. [St. Joseph, MI: American Society of Agricultural Engineers, 1980], 27).

Intra, mentra, cutra, corn;
Apple seed and apple thorn;
Wire, brier, limber, lock,
Three geese in a flock;
One flew east and one flew west;
And one flew over the cuckoo’s nest.

In some cases this ended the count, and he person marked by the last word was “it.” Sometimes the following line was added:
O-u-t out! (329)

III. THE VOICE OF SPRING

64 as in the tale by Hawthorne: probably an allusion to “The Miraculous Pitcher” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* (1851) in which Philemon and Baucis behold their village transformed:

But what was their astonishment! There was no longer any appearance of a village! Even the fertile vale, in the hollow of which it lay, had ceased to have existence. In its stead, they beheld the broad, blue surface of a lake, which filled the great basin of the valley from brim to brim, and reflected the surrounding hills in its bosom with as tranquil an image as if it had been there ever since the creation of the world.

64 “gool” and “pom-pom pull-away”: chase and tag games. In “Boy Life in the West—Winter” (*Midland Monthly* 1 (Feb. 1894): 113-22), a sketch in which Garland continued his reminiscences and which focused mostly on school life, he described “draw gool” as “simply a game of ‘daring out,’ rushing, dodging and touching. The touching called the victim to the opposite goal. And the magic of the touch lay in his having left his goal last. This was a very exciting game indeed, and the displays of speed were really marvelous at times” (117). “Pom-pom pull-away” was a popular school-yard game, which Garland remembered as being “played mainly when exhibitions or lyceums were being held at the school-house—‘The Grove School House.’ And it was the roughest of all games. The game was very simple, consisting of the selection of two to ‘stand’ in the middle of the road. After the cry, ‘Pom, pom, pullaway!’ those standing strove to seize and thwack three times, any of the runners who tried to cross the road. The runners so thwacked became in their turn aids to catch the rest. The result was a ferocious system of ‘tackling’ quite like the modern game of football. But with what zest we played it, and how many the coats torn from our backs!” (118).

80 the huge harrows: the harrow, also known as a drag, was a machine which was drawn over the plowed field to pulverize the turned earth. In his “Author’s Notes” to the Allyn and Bacon edition of *Boy Life*, Garland described the drag:

The prairie farmers used the word “drag” to mean a harrow. The drag was made in two ways: first, two large pieces of wood were studded with iron teeth and fastened together somewhat like the letter A. This was called the A-drag,” or “A-harrow.” Second, the hinged drag consisted of two square sections of criss-cross framework set with square-pointed iron teeth and hinged together. The drag was drawn diagonally so that the teeth would not track closely but cut individual paths and so pulverize the soil more thoroughly. (235)

Later, the harrow developed into the revolving disk harrow and the spring-tooth harrow (see fig. 7).

80 the seeder: in Garland’s time, seeding wheat was usually accomplished with a horse-drawn seeder and cultivator, a device



Fig. 7. An illustration by E. W. Deming of a harrow from *Boy Life on the Prairie* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 63.

with a mechanism to broadcast seed and a series of hinged teeth to cover the seed. Rogin reports that Esterly’s Broad-Cast Seeder and Cultivator (fig. 8) was exhibited at the Iowa State Fair in 1867 and sold one thousand units that year in Iowa (202). In *Boy Life on the Prairie*, Garland amplified his description: “Mr. Stewart drove a load of wheat into the field and dispersed the white sacks across the land, like fence posts. The hired man followed with the broadcast seeder” (64).

Fig. 8. The Esterly Broadcast Seeder and Cultivator, 1867. (From Leo Rogin, *The Introduction of Farm Machinery in Its Relation to the Productivity of Labor in the Agriculture of the United States During the Nineteenth Century*, 202.)

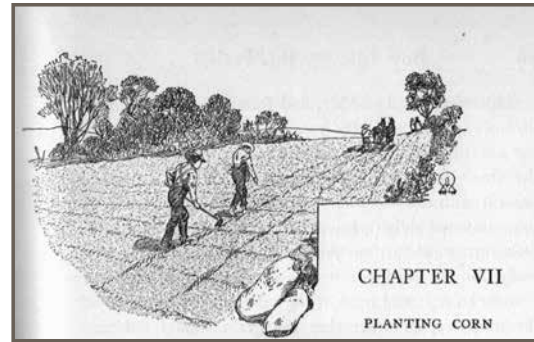
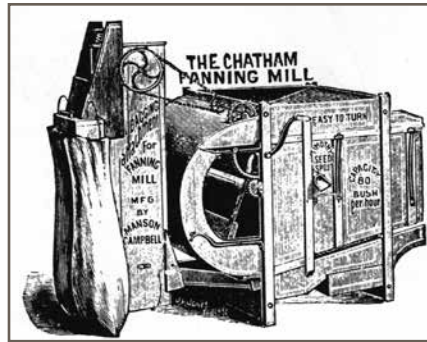


81 the fanning-mill: a device to separate grain from chaff, typically a hand-cranked mechanism that turned several wooden paddles within a box, with the grain falling through screens. Here, the device is used for a final cleaning before planting (fig. 9).

84 Lohengrin: a romantic opera by Richard Wagner, first performed in 1850.

IV. BETWEEN HAY AN’ GRASS

85 a contrivance resembling a four-runnered sleigh: farmers commonly used a sled, made of three or four sharpened two-by-fours fastened to a plank, which a horse then pulled to mark the field in even rows to ease cultivation of weeds. An illustration from *Boy Life on the Prairie* illustrates the scene Garland describes. At upper left is the check-row marker sled (fig. 10).



Left: Fig. 9. The Chatham Fanning Mill, 1894. (From Graeme R. Quick and Wesley F. Buchele, *The Grain Harvesters* [St. Joseph, MI: American Society of Agricultural Engineers, 1978], 52). **Right:** Fig. 10. An illustration by E. W. Deming from *Boy Life on the Prairie* showing the procedure for planting corn (63).

93 Mr. Howells’ position: William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was the foremost man-of-letters of the day, and in his column Editor’s Study for *Harper’s Monthly* he vigorously campaigned for an American literature that celebrated the common, everyday aspects of life. Garland would soon become a Howells’ partisan, meeting the elder writer soon after he wrote this sketch, and his remark here may have been prompted by a line in which Howells quoted Emerson:

It is only the extraordinary person who can say, with Emerson: “ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic. . . . I embrace the common; I sit at the feet of the familiar and the low. . . . Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. . . . The perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries. . . . The foolish man wonders at the unusual, but the wise man at the usual. . . . To-day always looks mean to the thoughtless; but to-day is a king in disguise. (“Editor’s Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 75 [Oct. 1887]: 803)

100 “herd law”: As farms began to spread out on the Iowa prairie, free-ranging cattle increasingly began to damage crops. In 1870 Iowa enacted a herd law, requiring cattle owners to be responsible for damages caused by their herds. As a result, free-ranging cattle were increasingly fenced in.

V. MEADOW MEMORIES

113 the old-fashioned scythe and rake: before the invention of horse-drawn mowers, farmers used a scythe to cut hay and a hand rake to gather it. The Meadow King Mower, manufactured by Gregg & Co. (fig. 11), was one model of many horse-drawn riding mowers. A self-dumping spring-tooth horse rake was a riding implement consisting of a ten-foot row of curved steel teeth about two feet long. The horse drew the implement over the cut hay; when the teeth were full, the farmer operated a foot pedal to dump the hay into a windrow.



Fig. 11. The Meadow King Mower. (From C. H. Wendel, *Encyclopedia of American Farm Implements & Antiques*, 262.)

113 “switchel”: also known as haymaker’s punch, switchel is a traditional beverage made by mixing water, cider vinegar, ginger, and often a sweetener such as sugar, molasses, or honey.

118 Whittier: an allusion to John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem “The Barefoot Boy” (1855), which Garland likely encountered in his *McGuffey Eclectic Reader* while at school. One verse of the poem reads,

Though the flinty slopes be hard,
Stubble-speared the new-mown sward,
Every morn shall lead thee through
Fresh baptisms of the dew;
Every evening from thy feet
Shall the cool wind kiss the heat

118 the Hollingsworth riding horse-rake: introduced by the J. Dodds Company in Dayton, OH, about 1875, the Hollingsworth horse rake was a short-lived model of a spring-tooth rake (fig. 12).

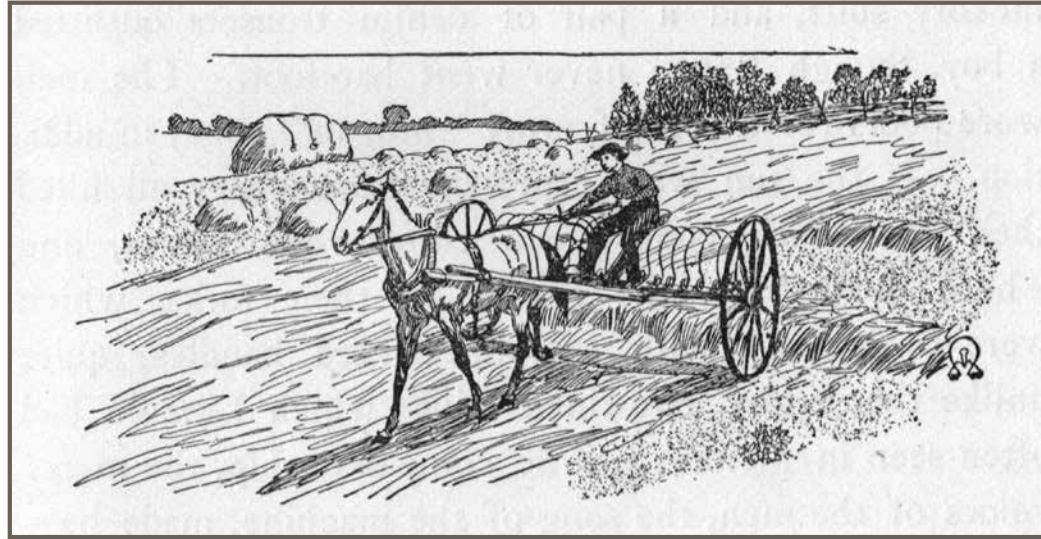


Fig. 12. An illustration by E. W. Deming of a spring-tooth horse-rake from *Boy Life on the Prairie* (109).

119 which Millet and his fellows paint: Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) was a French painter noted for his realistic scenes of peasants at work and one of the founders of the Barbizon School. Garland may have in mind such paintings as *The Hay Trussers* (1850-51), *Haystacks, Autumn* (1873-74), or, his most famous, *The Gleaners* (1857).

119 harpoon fork: patented in 1964 by E. L. Walker, the harpoon fork was an implement designed to help lift hay to a barn loft. Similar to a whaler's harpoon, the device "had tines from twenty-five to thirty-five inches long with folding barbs housed in the shaft near the point. The fork was driven into the load of hay, and as the horse tightened the rope for lifting the fork, the barbs sprung out of the tip and held the hay" (R. Douglas Hurt, *American Farm Tools from Hand-Power to Steam-Power* [Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1982], 92-93).

VI. MELONS AND EARLY FROSTS

146 The quality of the feast: perhaps an allusion to Aristotle's *Politics*, in which the philosopher remarks, "the guest will judge better of a feast than the cook" (Benjamin Jowett translation, 1885). The context is the debate over whether experts are better suited to choose government than the people.

158 O, weird sisters!: an allusion to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In Act I, scene 3, three witches prophesy that Macbeth shall become king.

158 "quates": dialect pronunciation for quoits, a traditional game in which a closed disk is tossed at a stake. Unlike the similar game of horseshoes, a quoit is a smaller disk, and the goal of dropping the disk over the stake is more difficult to achieve.

159 "Cape Cod Folks": a local color novel by Sarah Pratt McLean Greene (1856-1935), published in 1881. An Alewife is a species of fish often used to bait lobster traps.

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All images contained in this collection were captured in Mitchell County, Iowa in 2011.

AFTERWORD

Iowa does not scream its beauty, it whispers it. You may not see it from the window of a speeding car but the beauty is there, lurking everywhere. In the misty mornings. And the frosty autumns. In the vast plains and broad horizons covered by endless sky. The beauty of Iowa knows no bounds, but it does help to slow down a bit and take a careful look, or you risk missing another glimpse of wonder and beauty.

The writings of Hamlin Garland have struck me much the same way: they contain depth and beauty that doesn’t always reach out and scream at you. Careful reading yields unique insights and understanding. The harsh and stark world of life on the prairie is delivered in one breath only to be contrasted by Nature’s grandeur and wonder in the next. The toil and tribulations of working the land are made real but so is the fun and enjoyment of the evening gathering after a hard day.

As I set out to capture images of Garland’s Iowa, these dichotomies of stark and harsh versus wonder and beauty were front and center in my mind. What might have seemed bleak and ordinary at first glance often revealed beauty and magnificence upon closer inspection. It was this search for the deeper beauty that kept me coming back to Iowa, and the result for me has been a deep appreciation of the sublime nature of the Iowa landscape.

The original Garland homestead still stands in Mitchell County, Iowa (plates 18 and 33). All of the images in this book were taken within Mitchell County during 2011, most within close proximity to the Garland homestead. Just as the “Boy Life” sketches covered all the seasons of the year, so do my images. I hope this series of photographs help you see and appreciate Iowa in a new way, just as Garland’s words will.

Jon Morris
November 2013

